

Research a calling and passion for former EAI director

At East Asian Institute, he helped build links to enable China to understand S'pore better

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From a one-room, one-teacher school in a small, hardscrabble mountain village in Zhejiang province to the hallowed halls of Beida, Princeton and Harvard.

That was the academic odyssey of Professor Zheng Yongnian, now 57, before he landed in Singapore in 1997 to do research at the East Asian Institute, which he would go on to head for 11 years until May this year.

One of the few Chinese nationals trained in modern social sciences at the time – he has a PhD in political science from Princeton – Prof Zheng chose to come to Singapore because he was fascinated by the economic miracles of the “four little dragons” of East Asia and wanted to find out more.

Influenced by Confucianism, all four – Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore – went from post-war poverty to rich, newly industrialised economies in just four decades by the 1980s.

He planned to stay just two years but went on to spend 20 years here – apart from the three at Nottingham University in 2005-2008 where he started its China Policy Institute – becoming EAI's director in 2008.

This was a long way to come for someone who wanted only to be a

middle school teacher and whose father, when he heard that his son had won a place at Peking University, was not pleased because he would be losing a farm hand.

At Beida, as the university is commonly known, the young Zheng was awestruck to see so many books in its library. He would spend a lot of time there devouring the books.

“I found life easy in Beida; life was hard in the countryside with no books to read, only picture books,” he recalled.

He went to Beida in 1981 and spent the next nine years at a university known for its liberal bent, first as a student and then as an assistant professor. It was a time of intellectual ferment as the closed communist country was just beginning to reform and open up.

He studied international relations for his first degree and political science for his masters, spending much time in his post-grad years translating and writing articles on Western political thought.

“The 1980s were the best time for intellectuals,” said Prof Zheng. “We were excited, every day we'd talk about reform and democratisation and sometimes we went into the streets to protests, there were so many protests in the 80s.”

The most pivotal were the Tiananmen pro-democracy protests in 1989 that ended in a bloody crack-



Former East Asian Institute head Zheng Yongnian landed in Singapore in 1997, planning to be here for two years. But the years stretched to two decades. While he liked his work as EAI director, he also wanted to go back to research as a scholar, so he has chosen to step down. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

down on June 4. While Prof Zheng did not take part directly, he went to the Square to make sure his students were all right.

In the aftermath of the protests, many of his courses – which were on comparative politics and Western political theory – were cancelled and he decided to go to the United States to continue with his studies.

Going to Princeton was another eye-opening experience, and not only for the Western training that he received. For he also met Chinese dissidents there and learnt more about the changes that the reformists were trying to implement before June 4.

It was at Princeton in 1995 just before he graduated that he saw an ad by the Institute of East Asian Political Economy – the predecessor of the EAI – for researchers. He applied and, as instructed, wrote to a Dr Goh Keng Swee, whom he addressed as Dr Swee, not knowing that in Singapore the surname comes before the personal for Chinese names.

Before he came to Singapore, he

went to Harvard for his post-doctoral, learning from luminaries like social scientist Ezra Vogel.

Shortly after he arrived, the IEAPE – which began as the Institute of East Asian Philosophies, an independent think-tank started in 1983 by Dr Goh, then deputy prime minister, to study Confucianism – was brought under the aegis of the National University of Singapore and renamed the East Asian Institute.

The IEAPE had been researching China's economic reforms and related political changes. The EAI would be more academically oriented and would conduct both academic and policy-related research on China's political, economic and social development. Its policy research work, in keeping with that of its predecessors, would remain fact-based analysis of issues uncoloured by ideology.

A key project that Prof Zheng undertook was the Suzhou Industrial Park to draw lessons from a project that saw Singapore having some difficulties with its Suzhou partners.

He left for Nottingham Univer-

sity in 2005 because it offered him tenure and the opportunity to start its China Policy Institute to study contemporary China.

In 2008, he was brought back to the EAI as director by then chairman Wang Gungwu.

As director, Prof Zheng has added a new dimension to EAI's work – building links with Chinese think-tanks and working with them on joint research projects, workshops and forums to help China understand Singapore better. “I think it's also important for China to understand Singapore and South-east Asia, that's why we (raised our) profile in China,” he said.

He also started a second journal, the East Asian Policy, to take the institute's work to a wider audience. Prof Wang, who was director from 1997 to 2007, had started the academic journal China: An International Journal in 2003.

The EAI under Prof Zheng also worked with think-tanks in the region as part of the Network of East Asian Think-tanks as well as with European research institutes.

While he liked his work as director, Prof Zheng also wanted to go back to research which he says is his calling and passion as a scholar, so he has chosen to step down.

As research professor, he will continue to write policy papers and guide young researchers but also focus more on long-term research.

As for research, he is nearing completion of the last of his trilogy on China. His first book was on the Chinese Communist Party, the second on China's political economy and the last will be on its politics.

After this, he will move on to research China-US relations and the concepts of war and peace.

He is staying on in Singapore to do this because “Singapore is really a good place to research on China, not so far and not so close”.

Also, while in the West, there might be some ideological pressure, here in Singapore, he says, there is no such pressure when researching China and “you have a free mind”.

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