

NUS professor wins prestigious global prize for geography

First Singaporean to receive accolade specialises in migration issues

Ang Qing

A National University of Singapore (NUS) professor who specialises in migration issues has become the first Singaporean to receive an accolade widely regarded as the Nobel Prize in geography.

In a statement on Tuesday, NUS announced that Professor Brenda Yeoh, the Raffles Professor of Social Sciences and Director for Humanities and Social Science Research at the NUS Office of the Deputy President (Research & Technology), has been awarded the international Vautrin Lud Prize 2021.

The award is given to geographers for outstanding achievement in the field. It is named after Vautrin Lud, a 16th century French scholar, who is credited with naming the New World “America” after Amerigo Vespucci.

Since 1991, the award has been presented annually to a single laureate by an international jury at the International Geography Festival in France. Prof Yeoh was awarded at the 32nd edition of the festival, which was held from Oct 1 to 3.

At the festival, Prof Yeoh made a presentation on the exacerbating effect that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the precarity that transient migrant workers face, and how it has exposed the unsustainable nature of temporary migration for nation-states like Singapore.

She also suggested that the pandemic has offered an opportunity to reconfigure temporary migration so it is more sustainable and equitable, such as by offering visas and contracts of longer duration and incorporating migrant workers into national healthcare and safety nets.

She said the award was a great

honour and “a total surprise”.

“I am deeply appreciative of being found worthy of this illustrious prize,” she said.

“It is a mark of NUS Geography’s international reach and important recognition that significant insights in geographical scholarship in the context of Asia... can be influential on the global stage.

“I thank the University for... the opportunity to work on the salient issues related to transnational migration that is affecting our society and I look forward to advancing research in this field.”

She noted that the pandemic has made border crossings even more difficult and dangerous.

“Crossing borders is also about intercultural encounters, about meet-

ing one another in all our distinctiveness and differences... Migration research helps us think through these tricky issues so that we can learn to do things differently in making the world a better place.”

Currently the leader of the Asian Migration Cluster at the Asia Research Institute in NUS, she has published in 35 books and written more than 230 journal articles.

She has taught and researched at the NUS Department of Geography for more than 30 years.

In July, she was the only scholar from Singapore elected to the Fellowship of the British Academy – Britain’s national academy for the humanities and social sciences.

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