

## The Public Intellectual

SMU Associate Professor Eugene Tan studies the impact of public and private sector policies on Singapore's society.

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AsianScientist (Jul. 9, 2015) - By Grace Chua - In many regards—be it law, politics, economics, governance or other respects—Singapore is an outlier. Some academics feel it is myopic to focus one's work so closely on a single country, especially one so small, but Associate Professor Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University (SMU) School of Law considers it otherwise, and regards it as a national duty.

His varied research, from constitutional and administrative law, to the drivers of corporate social responsibility in Singapore, to the treatment of foreign domestic workers, stems from a deep interest in how laws and public policy in the Republic can influence and contribute to society.

"I'm somewhat of an oddball because I'm not a typical black-letter law academic," says Professor Tan, a former foreign service officer who has spent the last 14 years at SMU.

He initially studied law, then completed a master's degree in comparative politics, and brings both perspectives to his work. For instance, he says, laws are a product of the society that develops them. Laws, in turn, mould society as well.

Professor Tan's belief in an academic's role as an independent public commentator led him to serve as a Nominated Member of Parliament for a 2½-year term between February 2012 and August 2014, and he continues to actively contribute opinion-editorials to the local media and

comment on his research areas; to date, he has had more than 4,000 media mentions in local and foreign media.

## **The multicultural fabric of Singapore**

A key theme of Professor Tan's work is how national policies help to develop and strengthen a multicultural society. For example, those buying a Housing & Development Board (HDB) flat are subject to ethnic quotas for each block and neighbourhood to prevent racial enclaves from forming, while a slate of electoral candidates fielded in a group representation constituency must have an ethnic mix from the main racial groups in Singapore.

But while there are specific policies that aim to boost multiracialism, Singapore's tough laws and strong government controls has made Singaporeans "blind to the fact that we need greater understanding," Professor Tan says.

"Singapore's population is overwhelmingly ethnic Chinese, and may not sufficiently appreciate the position and concerns of the minorities in Singapore."

What's more, Professor Tan says that current multiracial policies may soon be out of date due to changing social realities, arguing for more effort to be devoted to strengthening the Singaporean national identity instead.

"If our policy continues to be built on the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) framework, then we are trying to shoehorn people into categories that have very little relevance to reality," he reasons.

He is currently working on new studies of multiculturalism. With colleagues from Paris' Sorbonne and the National University of Singapore (NUS), Professor Tan is helping to compare how Muslim minorities integrate in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies of Singapore and France.

And while his research centres on the Singapore context, Professor Tan's work has garnered notice and grant funding from international as well as local institutions, such as the Centre for International Law at NUS, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, and the US Department of Homeland Security's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. His various articles and chapters have been cited by other academics more than 600 times.

## **How corporations can generate social benefit**

Professor Tan also examines the drivers of corporate social responsibility in Singapore, and argues that it is under-utilised as a means of competitive advantage here. Corporate social responsibility, or CSR, is how companies do business in a way that also generates social benefit, such as when a palm oil firm grows its crops in a sustainable and responsible way, or when firms take proactive steps to improve worker welfare beyond legal requirements.

In Singapore, he says, companies tend to view philanthropy and corporate volunteerism as a compliance issue rather than an integral way of doing business.

"Very often you can tell whether the CSR programme is serious or not by looking at how closely it's connected with the core business of the company and how employees are purposefully involved in the programme."

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And the CSR agenda in Singapore is largely driven by government, through the official tripartite setup of government, labour unions and employers. In 2005, the tripartite partners set up the Singapore Compact for CSR to raise the level of CSR understanding and practice by the local business community.

But CSR should be taken seriously and can lead to a win-win situation for both corporations and society, says Professor Tan.

“There is inadequate appreciation of how Singapore and the business community could use CSR as a strategic advantage to grow their business and to avoid it operating against them, for example, through CSR standards being used as a non-tariff barrier to trade.”

## **A vision for Singapore**

Professor Tan, who is currently working on a book examining the laws and policies that govern race, language and religion here, believes there is ample room for Singaporean academics based here to work on issues pertaining to Singapore’s society.

“It would be a sad day if the leading lights in fields of enquiry critical to Singapore are non-Singaporeans based overseas due to local disinterest or comment being stifled,” he says

Asked what his vision for Singapore is, Professor Tan says: “I hope that we will become a society that is known for our strong commitment to the rule of law, and also to the values that strengthen the dignity of the individual regardless of his or her station in life.”

“If we attract people to our society, it should be because they are inspired by the values we hold, and not because of the pecuniary value that we bring them,” he adds.

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