

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Digital Narratives of Asia

Institute for Societal Leadership (2016-2018)

11-1-2016

Ong Keng Yong [Singapore, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Civil Service]

Keng Yong Ong

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/isl_dna



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Citation

Ong, Keng Yong. Ong Keng Yong [Singapore, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Civil Service]. (2016). 1-9.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/isl_dna/39

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Societal Leadership (2016-2018) at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Narratives of Asia by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylds@smu.edu.sg.

Interviewee: **ONG KENG YONG**
Interviewer: Sabrina Chua
Date: 11 January 2016
Location: Singapore

0:00:19

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, thank you very much for speaking with the Institute for Societal Leadership. We're going to start with your career in MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), because the bulk of your career has been in the Foreign Service so... if you don't mind me asking, why did you decide to go to, into the Foreign Service?

0:00:37

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

When I was in law school at the then University of Singapore, there were 147 of us. It is, until today, one of the largest groups of law graduates. So, halfway through law school, I was asked to attend a career talk by some guys from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Singapore. I was quite impressed. So, from third year onwards in law school, I decided to look at international issues.

I realised that the Foreign Service, as they call it, utilises a lot of the analytical training that we do in law school. The gift of the gab is also valued in the Foreign Service in dealing with foreign diplomats, and other countries around the world. I said, "If I feel that I should look at a non-legal career, MFA would be a good choice." Actually the other push factor is really that... looking at 147 of us, it would be very competitive. Deep in my heart, I had this issue of how to go and fight with my own classmates. I was sort of the class monitor for all the four years in the law school. I got quite fond of all my classmates, and my challenge was, if I had to fight with another classmate for one job in a law firm, most likely, I would just give it to the person.

0:02:29

[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, you're a softie at heart?

0:02:31

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

Yes, I think so, that's what my wife says. It was also quite lucky that year, when I came out after graduation, I applied for a job in the Foreign Ministry. I also applied for a job in Singapore Airlines, and I applied for a job in one of the law firms. When I opened the letterbox, it was the same day I got all three replies and... it was all acceptance. Then I did a very Singaporean thing: how much are they paying me? Ministry of Foreign Affairs was paying me the most, because it

took into account my National Service years. I said to my wife, then my girlfriend, "Maybe this is where I should go." I try for three, four years, and if I don't like it, I will come back and join the legal service, legal practice. That's how I got into Foreign Ministry.

0:03:31

[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, you enjoyed it?

0:03:32

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

Yes! But I also tell you, the Foreign Minister at that time was S. Rajaratnam. The Foreign Secretary, Permanent Secretary Foreign Affairs, was SR Nathan. He did a very clever thing, which I feel until today, had a strong impact on my life, and the rest of my cohort. He decided that we should develop what he called "area speciality". There can be Arab study specialists, there can be Southeast Asian study specialists, there can be Chinese study specialists, and so on so forth. He basically assessed all of us, and more than three quarters of us were put on this "Area Specialisation Programme". What he did was, two or three of us could go out in one year to do our master's degree, specialising in the designated area of studies.

0:04:29

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Did you have a choice in picking your specialisation?

0:04:31

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

I did not have a choice because they offered me to do Arab studies, and when I looked at it, I said, "Why me on Arab studies?" They said, "You passed this test that we did on language identification, and in spite of all the strange sounds from the Arabic language, you came out on top of it. So, I looked at the scenario, at that point in time there was no one in Arab studies or interested in the Middle East. Therefore, I said, "Let's do it. I ended up in Georgetown University doing my master's degree on Arab studies for two years.

I crammed three years of Arabic study in the two years of master's degree at Georgetown University. It was quite tough, first year in particular. But by the end of my first academic year, I got the hang of it. I went along quite okay. The main problem of course, was the Arabic language, which to us non-speakers, it's a completely different world. At that point in time, to pass the exam, and we were tested by the people from the US State Department, not from the university. We had to pass a level of competency required of the American diplomats. I guess what you call it? You crammed and passed your exam. That's how we struggled through. My wife was with me at the time, and we really had to work very hard.

0:6:21

Sabrina Chua

You mentioned that one of the influential factors in your career was S. Rajaratnam and SR Nathan, how was it like working for them?

0:06:31

Ong Keng Yong

For Mr Rajaratnam it was very straightforward. He had some ideas. He threw it at you, you should grasp it quickly, and go with him, with the flow. He was very learned. He read a lot. He had very passionate ideas about the world at that time. He was very anti-Communist, anti-Soviet Union in his own ways. He would do most of his own reading. He'd craft his own speech most of the time. But as a Foreign Minister, you have to deal with foreign visitors. Therefore, you are required to take note of whatever transpired during the meeting, and to be accurate, in a certain way, also very concise. You do this on your own, because he will not be bothered to read the record that you filed. We had to write it out clearly, succinctly, and pass it to our immediate supervisor, who would normally not be there in the meeting. You had to be very alert, and follow the discussion, and be accurate. If you come across anything that you are not familiar, you should go and ask the respective Desk Officer in the Ministry. "Hey, the Minister talked about Bosnia Herzegovina, what is it all about?" You get some ideas, and then you try to compare the notes that you recorded, to see whether it makes sense to put it together in a paragraph. It was very good training as far as I remember, because Mr Rajaratnam did not bother to look at his notes of conversation, or recordings of all this interaction. He just assumed you are competent, you will write well, and you document it for the sake of the bureaucracy, the ministry record.

0:08:44

Sabrina Chua

That's something you appreciated?

0:8:46

Ong Keng Yong

Yes. I think we very often... because he was such a globalist, he looked at everything with the international dimension. He had always the strategic angle, so you learn a lot listening to him talking to the foreign dignitaries. When we travelled with him, he was the easiest of bosses to look after. He would just do the protocol thing as we require him to do. The rest of the time he would be sitting down writing his own diary, and what not. So, from very early in my time at the Foreign Ministry, I learnt to be self-reliant, to be precise, to be accurate.

On top of that, we have Permanent Secretary SR Nathan, who was very sharp, and had what we call "elephant memory". He could remember everything he

asked you. We shy away from seeing him along the corridor, because whenever he catches you anywhere in the building, he will say, "Keng Yong, do this for me. I read something the other day, what was it about?" Then, we had to go and follow up on this. He was very instrumental in keeping all of us on the ball, so to speak. As I have mentioned earlier, he was very concerned about the institutionalisation of the Foreign Ministry. So he developed this concept of "area specialisation". At the same time, when we were asked to do this, he would give us what we call ECA, extra-curricular activities. So, my job in the beginning was to focus on the Middle East, and the Third World countries, and eventually I went to do Arab studies. But my extra reading--I'm the resource person for nuclear and disarmament issues--I always felt afraid to go to Mr Nathan. He would say, "Now tell me, what's this technical term in the disarmament document...?" Most of that area happened in Vienna, and at the UN (United Nations), so unwittingly, we also had to read a lot about UN work, and what not. That's how he trained the Foreign Service Officer. He was fussy about our recording, our writing. He would like to give us specialised training, and once you are given that speciality, you should be familiar with all that, and you are the resource person for the ministry for that area. Then thirdly, he would make sure that you are not boxed in into one subject, or one technical area. He gives you extra-curricular activity to do.

After a while, it became a challenge to keep up with it, because he would make you stay on your toes by asking you a question, or pose a comment for you to follow up whenever he sees you in the Ministry, or when he reads something, and he would write down a short note for you, or the so-called resource person to go and find an explanation to him as to why people said this, or what is this concept is about. So that way, we got a very broad multi-faceted training.

0:12:32

[Sabrina Chua](#)

What about Singapore's role in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), or strategic position when ASEAN was founded? What was its strategic position, and has it changed since?

0:12:44

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

The wonderful thing about Singapore diplomacy is that we are very consistent. We have got very good foundation. When we got into ASEAN, we know that ASEAN has certain limitations, but ASEAN can serve Singapore's interest in certain other ways. We have never, up till today, got carried away by the highs, or the lows of ASEAN. To put it differently, we are realistic about ASEAN, where it can help us, we would go full stream, full steam. But we know the extent in which the ASEAN vehicle can serve our interests.

The ASEAN mechanism helps us to overcome the small size of Singapore. At certain times, it also enables us to do more than what we alone can do. The selling point about ASEAN to many of the ASEAN audiences out there has always been that working as ten ASEAN members is better than working individually, or

small group of two, or three countries. ASEAN has helped us in two ways. One, we are now a big trading country. In fact, Singapore has always been in the top twenty of the world trading countries. So how do we keep the market open? How do we get other countries, which may be too inward looking, to be more open to trade, and other flow of investments, and skilled personnel? Through ASEAN, we were able to articulate the benefit, and the advantages of keeping free trade, free market.

0:15:00

[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, does the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) help?

0:15:02

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

It does help. People forget that the AEC originated from one period in history, which was very threatening to our own survival. This was in the year 1997, 1999, we had the 1997, 1998 Asian Financial Crisis, the Tom Yam Crisis as we call it, because of the collapse of the *baht*, and other currencies in the region. As a result of that, people in the capital rich countries were wary about Southeast Asia. Foreign direct investment declined, and as a result of the lousy economic condition, people started to look at all the bad things about Southeast Asia and put those bad things on top. What the ASEAN ministers did was to rally together, and we did quite a few things, including engaging big American consultancies, like McKinsey & Company, to do competitiveness study, to do things that will help refocus the investors' interest in Southeast Asia. AEC came from there, because when we studied the competitiveness of ASEAN, at that time, much of the FDI (Foreign direct investment) was being diverted to China, to even India, and at one point, to even Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt, and all that, because when you think about producing consumer goods, you go to those countries with the certain advantages. After the Tom Yam Crisis, as we call it, those guys with money will go to all these places. We need to bring people back into Southeast Asia. Using the ASEAN vehicle, we were able to persuade investors to take a second look at Southeast Asia, with the size of the market, and the potential of the middle class, and what not. Overall this ASEAN was the basis to construct an AEC, ASEAN Economic Community. Without ASEAN, how can we construct an AEC?

The problem I think is that our ASEAN leadership did not spend enough time articulating the difference between an ASEAN Economic Community, and the European Union. At that time, they were called the European Economic Community. People minimise this issue of supra-nationality in Europe, because they think that by integrating all the European economies, and not playing up on nationalism, Europe can grow much faster. But in the case of Southeast Asia, we were all very young countries, and you tell people to pool together their sovereignty advantages. People will look at you with aghast and unaccepting looks, because we all want to be our own country, and look after our own national interest. So, the leaders could have done more to explain that what

ASEAN was doing is to form a community, which pooled together our strength, developed regional initiatives, which will help our own national development, our own national reforms. We don't have a thing called the European Commission, that imposes specific supra-national policy, which everybody must follow regardless of whether you are capable or not. We still rely on regional ideas, and then leave it to the national authority to follow up. We are actually just using some of this community idea from Europe to help us facilitate the ASEAN Ten coming together. We are still very much an inter-governmental body. We are not a supra-national body.

Given the fact that we were all young nation states, the ability for all ten of us to come together in this manner actually is a significant achievement. We still have suspicion and mistrust of one another, but when we have a regional challenge, something that will hit all of us, like for example, at that time the financial crisis, we all come together and work together.

Now these days we have South China Sea, ASEAN may be maligned by all these ineffective statements, and what not. The fact is that we still stay together. To the other side, the Chinese diplomacy, they look at us as ASEAN. They try their best to divide and rule, but still more or less, we stay together as ASEAN. For the Americans, for the Japanese, for the Australians, and Indians, they see us as ASEAN. They believe that it's useful to continue to engage us, do things with us. Hopefully, we can be a bulwark against the Chinese expansion, but they also know that we don't want to take sides. So overall, the net result is active engagement of our Southeast Asian countries. Where there is an advantage for Southeast Asia to grow with, say India, or with Japan, we ride on it. Then, we have the US (United States) still engaged in this region, and much as we don't like to say so in public, all of us in ASEAN believe that this idea of balance of power in Southeast Asia is actually a doable and a good concept for ASEAN's future. Of course, Indonesia, as the biggest country in ASEAN and, very committed to non-aligned, would like to think that non-alignment is still the best way to go. But in reality, that may be something more difficult to achieve. So overall, ASEAN has given us a platform to practice all this thing called balance of power, avoiding taking sides, engaging all the major powers, in a more or less manageable manner. As we do all this, the Western investors, the big companies would say, "We can still go to Southeast Asia to do business. After all, they have got such a big market. If the ASEAN country knows how to deal with all these challenges facing them, with regard to the relationship with the big powers, we can go." That's where we are today.

It's very unfortunate that people don't look at this in the historical context, in the bigger picture. They just assume that it's a given. Big country will come here to look for friends. Big company will come here to look for business opportunity. It's all a big sales pitch if you'd like. With ASEAN, we have a very wonderful thing. In today's language it's a USP, Unique Selling Proposition. Without ASEAN, why would the big company come? You can say we have oil and gas, but so what? Oil and gas are much easier to buy and do in Middle East, and in Russia, why should I come to Southeast Asia? We have 600 over million people. I can go to some other places like India, or China. Why I need to pay attention to Southeast Asia?

But we say, “No, you are passing through our sea lanes of communication. Trading is done extensively between the East and West, and you need shipping to go through, you need airline to go through. So here we are, we give you good predictability. When it's necessary we talk about the connectivity, and when it's really hard-pressed, we talk about the rule of law.” All these things help to bring people to Southeast Asia, and the progress that we achieved today, in terms of general prosperity, in terms of Southeast Asia being in the mind-set of people around the world.

0:24:09

[Sabrina Chua](#)

What is the secret to ASEAN staying together, because like you said, historically there have been regional differences and conflicts?

0:24:16

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

The secret, really, is that all of us in our respective countries, know that by ourselves we cannot manage this big portfolio of transactions. To put it in very business-oriented terms, it is such a big business managing Southeast Asia. So, how do we deal with it? Using one bank to manage this big portfolio of investment, or this equity? Not possible. So, we have different bankers to help us, and where possible, we tell our bankers to converge their resources, to help us manage this big amount of transactions.

Maybe I should say also that, at the end of the day, Southeast Asian leaders quibble with one another. Southeast Asian nations, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, nag at each other, look at each other with envy from time to time, get mad with one another. But all the leaders so far, at least from my close observation in five years as Secretary General of ASEAN, they finally come to one basic point, which is that: strategically, we must engage each other, and hang out together. Because if we don't hang on together, we will be hung by whatever lousy transaction out there, lousy turn of events out there, and be played out by all the other big boys, in their own respective great games and diplomatic manoeuvres. The good thing about Southeast Asia, or about ASEAN, is that ultimately, we have a certain quality of leadership. Not many people know about this, not many people talk about this, but I think history will show that generally speaking as a region, the quality of our leaders is not bad. You may have idiotic people in some of the ASEAN countries, but when they come together, and they sit together as ASEAN leaders in a summit--as Secretary-General, I sit in five years of this kind of things--they talk to each other very sensibly, and as politicians. They all are political leaders, they're not the Sergeant Major from the army, who become President of a country by a *coup d'état*. They are all very clever.

0:26:54

[Sabrina Chua](#)

There were some...

0:26:55

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

Yes, but even in those kinds of context, they quickly learn the trick of the trade, by the socialisation as ASEAN Ten. I used to remember the Vietnamese, and the Laotian leaders. They talked very little in ASEAN meetings, but by the time I left after five years, the Vietnamese Prime Minister was very confident, the Laotian Prime Minister was more talkative, because every time they come for ASEAN Summit, there is the rigmarole of protocol, meeting, speeches. The ASEAN way: either we play golf, or we sing karaoke. You basically socialise these guys to a diplomatic quality, that make them feel more and more confident of themselves. This element has not been thoroughly studied, but when I discussed it with my predecessor as Secretary General, and my successor as Secretary General, we feel that this is a very important dimension of ASEAN, that people don't really attach enough importance and value.

0:28:11

[Sabrina Chua](#)

So, the ASEAN way is more a boon than a bane?

0:28:14

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

Yes definitely. It cannot be said to be exactly one way, or the other but overall, it helps. When we say there is non-interference, we go back to this basic concept. You run your own household, you run your own house decor, you do things in your own garden. Your neighbour next door, if you live in a semi-detached house, would have a lot of say, but still he cannot go and tell you, "I don't like the way you cultivate your garden, or I don't like the way you arrange your furniture in your living room." He can contribute ideas, and you say, "Okay, seems a good idea." But your neighbour cannot come and tell you, "Rearrange this!"

The other thing that I always put across is that people make a big deal about ASEAN having this non-intervention policy, but is that so unique to ASEAN, to Southeast Asia? Everywhere around the world they do that. Even in today's Europe. The Spanish don't like the way the French tell them what to do at the border, vice versa. So, that is not unique, and people make a big deal out of this, because they think that this seems to be one punch line they can deliver against ASEAN.

Secondly, when you look through, what we are doing in ASEAN is this, when we say we have this non-interference, non-intervention principle, it's not correct to say we are so precise. We have through the years started to refine our own rule about this. We may not tell you how to rearrange the furniture in your living room, but you, after a while say, "I'm getting stale of this. Maybe I ask my neighbour what do you do?" So, from 2004, 2005, the Indonesian authority

started to talk about Aceh, and then the Independent Movement of Aceh, and brief the ASEAN leaders from the other countries about what is happening in Aceh. As a result of that, the Filipinos started to talk about southern Mindanao to the other ASEAN leaders, and explain why it is such an intractable problem: the Muslims and the Christian relationship in southern Philippines. In 2006, Thaksin, before he was deposed, decided to say, "Since all of you are prepared to talk a little bit about your own domestic issues, I want to tell you why I'm not happy with you talking about southern Thailand. But now, I understand that your starting point on this issue is here, in this manner. Let me explain to you my position. Overtime, you notice that the respective countries with all this kind of tricky, intractable issues, have started to share their respective approaches, and their respective concerns, with the other countries.

This is how we think in ASEAN, we overcame the isolation of Myanmar. We had a hard time with the rest of the world, but because of the ASEAN socialisation at the leadership level I talked about just now, and because of our constant harping on the need to look at our own house, and how can we as responsible members, help each other. I believe that the Myanmar leadership could see for themselves the ability for them to continue the way they are, or the way they were. As I explained to my Western scholar friends, I say that we cannot claim credit for what happened in Myanmar, but we definitely can claim credit for being able to stand up to the demand of the world to force the Myanmar guy to change overnight. Maybe if we had done that, there might be a different situation now in Myanmar. We never know, because we are tinkering with seventeen, eighteen, twenty different communities. Until today, they haven't even sorted it out.

So final point is that: ASEAN is quite unique. We have done it in the organic way, in my opinion, typically Southeast Asian. We have taken in the extraneous issues, the external ideas, and we try to cook it in a manner that we can have a nice delicious dish. It may not be the end of our problem, but at least what we can say to each other is that: we have overcome a lot of difficulty together, and we should not easily give up in the face of new challenges that we have. Today, we have to deal with issues like terrorism, religion and radicalisation of groups within our own society, because we are so multi-cultural, multi-religious. But if we look at how we had tackled some of these previous difficult political and geopolitical issues, I think we have a certain way. It is not the only formula, but we can at least minimise the potential for a dramatic outbreak of violence, or war between the states.

0:34:21

[Sabrina Chua](#)

Thank you very much, sir, for speaking with us.

0:34:24

[Ong Keng Yong](#)

Thank you very much, Sabrina.