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Q&A with Professor Lily Kong

Royal Geographical Society

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Publication: Royal Geographical Society Online

Date: 26 May 2024

Headline: Q&A with Professor Lily Kong

Q&A with Professor Lily Kong



Professor Lily Kong is the first Singaporean woman appointed president of any university in Singapore. She is known for her research on urban transformations, and social and cultural change in Asia.

Lily is also an expert in street food and hawker culture in Singapore. The second edition of her book, *Singapore Hawker Centres: People, Places, Food* (2023) offers a detailed, vibrant journey through Singapore's culinary heritage of hawker culture, and highlights this vital part of Singapore's society and culture.

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Professor Lily Kong

What role do you do now and how would you describe your work?

"I have the privilege of leading a university, the Singapore Management University (SMU), and have been President for over five years now. As the first Singaporean woman to be appointed President of any university in Singapore in the 120-year history of higher education in my country, I relish the enormous opportunities that this presents, and feel the immense responsibilities that it carries. The role brings with it opportunities to shape the education and development of generations of young people, to focus the collective efforts of colleagues on cultivating talents, developing skills, encouraging purpose, and nurturing values.

"The opportunities are equally immense for our research and knowledge production to be directed to the betterment of society. Where universities have sometimes lost sight of their fundamental *raison d'être*, leadership becomes critical. These are the responsibilities I have committed to. That I have been entrusted with a leadership role never before accorded a woman in my country means that there is particular significance and enlarged responsibility to foster mentorship, create opportunities and engender a nurturing and empowering culture for both women and men."

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What has been the highlight of your career, regardless of how big or small, so far?

"Being awarded this Victoria Medal must surely count as one of the greatest highlights! To be acknowledged amongst outstanding peers, by the learned society of one's discipline, for a lifetime's work... It is as exhilarating as it is humbling. I cannot thank the Society enough and especially also my family, friends and colleagues who have journeyed with me over the years."

What projects are you working on right now?

"I tend to have multiple irons in the fire at any one time. I've just completed the second edition of a book on street food and hawker culture in Singapore, and am beginning to shape a larger project on food geographies more broadly. I have yet to decide if I will keep my focus to Singapore, or extend it more broadly to selected cities in Asia. I have an ongoing project on smart cities in Southeast Asia, undertaken collaboratively with a colleague at SMU. It selects cities involved in the ASEAN Smart Cities Network to understand better the motivations and challenges associated with technology-driven forms of regional integration and consolidation. We examine how the smart city is deprovincialised through its embedding within transnational flows of capital, ideas and expertise, but also how local contexts, structures of governance and urban cultures reprovincialise the city."

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What is one thing you wish you had learned earlier in your career?

"I wish I had invested time in research questions where I felt I was going to make some impact on communities, rather than because there was a gap in the literature and an opportunity to publish. My younger self responded to the 'publish or perish' Damocles sword, and was perhaps more driven by the need to publish than the urgency of making the world a better place. The two are not necessarily at odds with each other, and I wish I had realised that early in my career. The impact agenda has gained some momentum in different parts of the globe, and I very much hope that it will shape the attitudes and work of younger scholars too."

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What are you looking forward to in the future? What's next?

"I look forward to a time when academia extricates itself from the dangers of purely focusing on academic metrics, superficial rankings, and cut-throat research cultures, to embrace societal impact in the assessment of research, and cultivating supportive and collaborative cultures. As a university leader, I am committed to leading and contributing to such shifts sector-wide. In the medium term, I look forward to sabbatical leave, and returning to full-time professorial life when I hand over the presidency to the next unsuspecting victim!"

