



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

In his career spanning strategy consulting, economic and political analysis and international business development, social entrepreneur and public intellectual Tan Sri Dr Michael Yeoh is unique for the variety of things he has done in the thought leadership sphere, most notably co-founding the Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute 25 years ago. Having just published a new book on his colourful career, the cerebral 65-year-old talks to Anandhi Gopinath about his unconventional career and society's role in nurturing leadership, unity and harmony.

Not many Malaysians can claim to have taken on as many roles in public service as Tan Sri Dr Michael Yeoh. In his 65 years, the man has done a great deal, albeit quietly, to support and drive positive change in the country. Apart from co-founding independent think tank Asian Strategy & Leadership Institute (Asli) 25 years ago, Yeoh has served as Malaysia's representative on the High Level Task Force on Asean Connectivity, commissioner of the Malaysian Competition Commission, the Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) and the Royal Commission of Police, and member of the Advisory Board of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission. He was also a member of the National Unity Consultative Council and the National Economic Consultative Council. Says Yeoh, "Yes, I suppose there are very few Malaysians who have had the opportunity to serve the nation in this way."

Tall with a gentle gait, Yeoh is a deeply intelligent and insightful man, and speaks with a quiet confidence that comes from his years of experience in the fields of strategy and economic and political analyses as well as thought leadership.

His colourful and enriching career has been encapsulated in a new book, titled *The Road Less Travelled — Footprints From An Unconventional Journey*, which is so hot off the presses that it will not be available in bookstores for another month. With several publications relating to leadership, management and politics already under his belt, this new tome chronicles the many global events he witnessed, creating a memoir that is part personal story and part history lesson. Written in the same uncomplicated way that he speaks, the book is filled with pictures that underscore his stories.

"I am very meticulous about details and I've kept the pictures carefully for this," he says, signing a copy for me. "This book had been in the planning for a long time, so the actual writing wasn't altogether difficult because I knew exactly what I wanted it to be. It's an abridged memoir, let's say — no one wants to read thick books anymore, and I wanted to keep the focus on the many interesting events that I had been part of throughout my career."

The book comes six months after he stepped down as CEO of Asli, a move that was regarded as quite unexpected. His reason, however, invites very little question — it was simply his time to do so. "Having turned 65 recently, I thought it was time to retire — it's well past the retirement age, after all — and let fresh leadership take over," he says. "I'm very pleased that in its 25 years, Asli has become one of the leading think tanks in Malaysia and its centre for public policy studies was rated one of the best in Asia as well. I am honoured to have served Asli for 25 years as co-founder, director and CEO. I must thank the board of Asli for the confidence it had in me to lead it for so many years."

Founded jointly with Sunway Group chairman Tan Sri Jeffrey Cheah, Asli was established with the vision to create a better society by helping organisations enhance their competitiveness, leadership and strategic capabilities. Over the years, it did this via several critically-acclaimed programmes, conferences, international trade and business advisories, business councils, CEO peer groups and scores of publications.

"As a think tank, our role is to promote and uphold the truth — what's important is the integrity of our re-

search ... also that our methodology is faultless. We think it's important to have independent research and frank discussions on the various topics we cover," says Yeoh.

Its pointedly independent stance also means that some of its research courted controversy, most famously researcher Dr Lim Teck Ghee's paper on bumiputera equity ownership surpassing its quotas. The backlash against this was so intense that Lim resigned from his post, although he continues to maintain the integrity of the research that backed his findings. "There were a lot of questions raised over that, and a lot of criticism as well," Yeoh recalls wearily.

However, this did not stop Asli from continuing its work to institute positive change. This job is not always easy, especially when the party you are trying to motivate to change is the mighty machinery of the federal government. Not unexpectedly, the change in sentiment brought about as a result of the 14th general election has been quite evident.

"In order to ensure our research benefits society, we try and reach out to the government and participate in a lot of government dialogues and meetings to submit our findings and recommendations. During such engagements, some of our ideas are considered, but not all. But after last year's general election, there seems to be a lot more openness and people have been given more democratic space. Also, people are more willing to accept criticism. Hopefully, it will enable more independent think tanks to grow in the country," Yeoh shares.

"You see, think tanks like Asli have a very important role in any country," he continues. "And I believe we know that there is space for more independent think tanks ... all of which will contribute to the development of a healthy democracy in the nation. These think tanks promote good governance and human rights, and they have the benefit of being able to engage with government, businesses and civil society."

In the time since he left Asli, Yeoh has joined two other think tanks — he is president of the Kingsley Advisory and Strategic Initiatives as well as the International Strategy Institute.

Our conversation in a sunlit section of Bella, The Big Group's semi-casual Italian restaurant in the Lorong Kurau enclave of Bangsar, soon meandered to the topic of leadership and how it can be better inculcated in the young. This has been a hotly debated topic for years — are leaders made or born? And if they are made, how do we create new ones?

"I think leadership is something that needs to be nurtured. We need to mentor leaders," Yeoh says thoughtfully. "What I think is leaders should have some core values, and one of the things I've been advocating for is that leadership should embrace the three Es and three Hs. The Es are ethics, excellence and execution, which is turning vision into reality. The Hs are hard work, humility and a sense of humour."

We beg your pardon? Yeoh smiles. "It's true. Leaders must be able to laugh at themselves, at their mistakes and learn from them. This ensures that they don't get so worked up when things don't go their way."

In the corporate sector, there is no shortage of charismatic, driven and effective leaders worth admiring. Yeoh has his own list, and we persuade him to share it with us. "In the corporate scene, we have a lot of good CEOs who have a very strong vision. I think that's very important, and to have a strategy to realise that vision. Datuk Tong Kooi Ong led one of the most innovative

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banks in the country when he was with Phileo Allied Bank. Then, there's Tan Sri Yong Poh Kon, who has turned Royal Selangor into a truly great Malaysian brand that happens to be a very well-run family business. I also see good leadership in Tan Sri Tony Fernandes, who, with AirAsia, has created one of the biggest Malaysian brands."

Whether or not you like pewter, whether or not you approve of Fernandes' firebrand-style of personal PR, Yeoh has a point — these are leaders capable of inspiring their people and driving successful, interesting businesses that have become global names.

In the political scene — the late Nelson Mandela will always be Yeoh's most respected in this regard — Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad earns top points too for his leadership abilities. Again, like him or not, no one can deny this sprightly 93-year-old's charisma, intelligence and vision. There is often talk about a succession plan and who in the current political ranks will be capable of filling Mahathir's very large shoes.

While no two people are the same, it does not mean that any one person is indispensable either. Yeoh is confident that when the time comes, the leader who succeeds Mahathir will do a good job. "Datuk Seri Anwar [Ibrahim] is ready and waiting, and has the vision and drive, I believe, and the capacity. Datuk Seri Azmin Ali is very intelligent and a huge possibility," Yeoh says, choosing his words carefully.

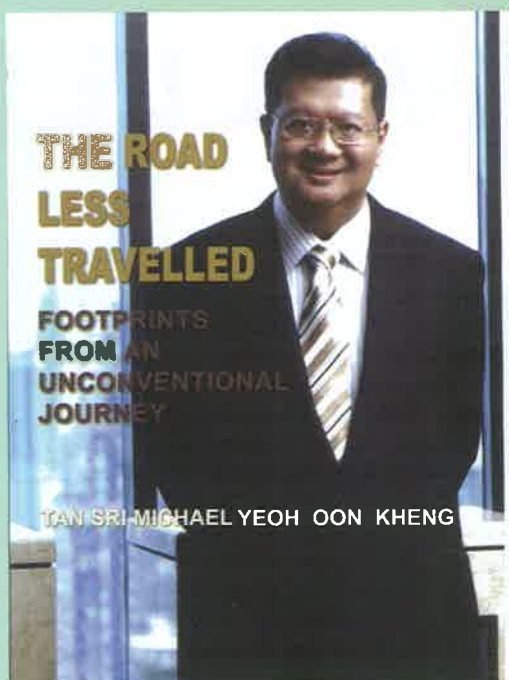
Among the younger set, Yeoh sees a great deal of potential. However, he says as a society, we need to be more supportive and nurturing to create a new generation of leaders. As painful as it may be, this includes giving them the space to make mistakes and learn from them.

"We need to do much more at the grassroots level in nurturing new leaders ... give them the chance to find their voice. But also, young people need to come forward and take on the challenge — they need to be willing to sacrifice the time and put in the effort, and when they do, I believe the opportunities will be there. I am especially impressed with Yeo Bee Yin, who is such a smart young woman. Hannah Yeoh also. I find Syed Saddiq [Syed Abdul Rahman] interesting because he's so passionate and very vocal about what he believes in. As a society, we are definitely a bit harsh on them sometimes ... we have to give them the chance to get stuff wrong and learn from it. Some of them have only been ministers for six months, after all."

Yeoh says this perspective should apply to the way we consider millennials as well — although some deserve the generalised label of being entitled, many do not. "Of course, there may be some who shun hard work, but there are more millennials who are very hardworking and are really inspired to make a difference in the world," he points out. "I'm beginning to see a trend of social enterprises — getting into businesses that contribute to society, which is wonderful and something we should be encouraging and supporting."

His water glass is refilled, and after a sip, he draws on his experience from being part of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) to talk about the sometimes tenuous situation in Malaysia these days. Simply put, we do not enjoy the kind of racial unity we once did, and Yeoh points out that the solution lies in a more mindful leadership.

"We must have leaders who are willing to stamp out extremism. And I think this is something that should be embraced by all Malaysians so that there is greater awareness of moderation and acceptance



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— and that leads to greater unity. People must be more accepting of differences and our diversity, and the intermingling of the various races needs to start from the time we are young."

He pauses to think for a second before continuing. "In the 1950s and 1960s, we all went to national schools, and in our classes, there was a lot of cultural and economic diversity. Today, this is no longer the case. Almost 95% of Chinese children attend Chinese schools, for example. During my time with the NUCC, we came up with a series of recommendations. Unfortunately, the previous government put them aside and did not act on them. We are hoping that the new government will follow through and perhaps implement some of the recommendations. I have heard Datuk Seri Mujahid Yusof Rawa talk about the Harmony Act, and that arose from the NUCC — it would sort of provide provisions to handle hate crimes, and this is great. Punitive measures against hate crimes is important, I think."

Our Education Minister Dr Maszlee Malik is facing a lot of criticism for his statements relating to educational policies, but they are often taken out of context. What he may perhaps lack in PR skills he does have in ability and strength of conviction, and Yeoh believes that many of his ideas are good ones and are putting our public school system back on track. The larger issue is not who the minister is, but formulating a plan that transcends the actual role.

"My worry has always been that every time there is a new minister of education, there are new policies, and the office has to start all over again. There needs to be a long-term plan that doesn't change regardless of the minister. Maszlee has put together some interesting ideas, that's for sure, and hopefully, the National Education Advisory Council will be able to implement them," he says.

Being an advocate for positive change is a daunting role, and Yeoh has held it tirelessly for more than four decades. What keeps him going, day after day? He smiles thoughtfully before answering. "Being able to contribute to build a better world, a better society — that's one thing. I also think it's very interesting and beneficial to keep ahead of geopolitics and geoeconomics, monitoring trends and issues. We need to learn from the world to see how we can make things better in Malaysia, because to keep pace with international development, we need to keep track of what is going on in the world. We live in what is known as a Vuca world — volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. What I'm doing now is enabling me to see what new directions we can take so that the country can effectively compete in this Vuca world."

Yeoh ends our chat with advice for anyone wanting to get into the think tank game — although it's a great industry to be in, he is not about to romanticise the experience. "You must have a sincere desire to make a positive change in society — I think that's important. And you need to be able to withstand a lot of criticism from both sides of the political divide because you're not going to be able to please everyone."

Printed on the back cover of Yeoh's book is a line from one of Robert Frost's poems, from which the tome got its name — "Two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference." Food for thought, indeed — would our life experiences be any richer had we taken the tougher journey to arrive there, and would that mean a life with fewer regrets? Based on Yeoh's unconventional journey as he served the nation over the years, this might seem the case. "I have no regrets, I suppose," he says. "I've stayed on my path, no matter what, and I've always been happy with it." **E**