Meet NTU professor Ng Yew Kwang, an original thinker and scholar unconfined by academic boundaries.

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there such a thing as a modern-day renaissance man—a polymath well versed in a diverse range of disciplines? It may be impossible for anyone to fully attain that ideal, but Professor Ng Yew Kwang is certainly well on his way. Currently the Albert Winsemius Chair Professor in economics at NTU, Prof Ng is well known for his work in welfare economics. Yet, his academic and personal interests are decidedly cross-disciplinary, spanning the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. NTULink chatted with him about his wide-ranging intellectual pursuits, particularly his love for Chinese literature.

AN UNCONFINED INTELLECT

While still an undergraduate at Nanyang University in the 1960s, Prof Ng published a paper in *The Journal of Political Economy*, a top economics journal. This, he said, played an important role in kick-starting his career as an economist. “To be able to have my paper published there provided me an accelerated path to a PhD degree,” he remembers. He went on to obtain his Bachelor of Commerce degree in economics from Nanyang University in 1966, and his PhD degree, also in economics, from Sydney University in 1971.

After almost three decades as a professor of economics at Monash University, Prof Ng took up his current position at NTU in 2013. Prof Ng has found great recognition for his work in welfare economics, a branch of economics that deals with how resource allocation impacts social welfare. In 2007, he received the highest award (Distinguished Fellow) of the Economic Society of Australia.

Yet, his interests are not confined to this discipline alone. Prof Ng has also published numerous papers in areas as diverse as biology, cosmology, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. His work has even launched new fields of inquiry: in 1995, his highly influential paper *Towards Welfare Biology: Evolutionary Economics of Animal Consciousness and Suffering* proposed the creation of ‘welfare biology’ as a new discipline, and sparked concern for the situation of animals in the wild.

A LOVE FOR LITERATURE

In addition to his academic interests, Prof Ng also has a keen, longstanding interest in Chinese literature, which he has been reading since he was in Primary Five. “My mother was a strong influence during my early childhood years,” recalls Prof Ng. “She always gave me space and encouragement to pursue my interest in Chinese literature.”

Two of Prof Ng’s favourite works are *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义) and *Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms* (东周列国志), which he admires for their historical value, poetry and interesting characters. He is also a fan of martial arts novels by Louis Cha Leung-yung, who is better known by the pen name Jin Yong (金庸).

Prof Ng also appreciates Chinese poetry, particularly verses from the Tang and Song Dynasties. “One of my favourite poems is *Climbing the High Terrace* （登高）by Du Fu （杜甫），a prominent Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty,” he shares.

APPRECIATING AND PRESERVING CHINESE HERITAGE

A staunch supporter of Chinese culture and heritage, Prof Ng is also passionate about efforts to preserve and promote it. “We should appreciate the beauty of Chinese literature—absorbing its essence can help enhance our literacy and moral values,” he says.

In 2016, Prof Ng and his wife donated S$100,000 at the NTU Chinese Heritage Centre’s Mid-Autumn Festival charity auction. Part of the sum went towards the purchase of *Sages in Ancient China*, a painting by the famous Chinese artist Master Yang Bajing. Prof Ng generously donated the painting to the Centre, where it is now permanently exhibited.

For students and alumni who are considering pursuing Chinese literature as an interest, Prof Ng has these words of wisdom to offer. “In my experience, having an interest is the most important thing,” he says. “But you also have to set aside time and put in the effort to learn—for example, listening, speaking and reading more are critical for developing your abilities as a student.”