Gongfu Master of Business school

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In many Chinese martial arts novels, pugilists often make their way up secluded mountains to master formidable fighting skills.

Then they descend to defend the helpless, right wrongs and uphold justice. They also pass on what they have mastered to disciples.

A great fan of sword fighting stories, Professor Bernard Yeung wants to turn out students like these knights errant. The dean and Stephen Riady Distinguished Professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School says well-trained and socially responsible individuals who understand the world and want to make it better are especially relevant in Asia.

"We need a lot of locations in Asia which have intellectual intensity and devotion because our economic development relies on people who can identify and solve burning questions, and who push boundaries to understand human society and economics. These people can become very good teachers who will train generations of students."

He himself tries to abide by the Wuxia (Mandarin for martial hero) code, dedicating a lot of his time to mentoring students and faculty, and pushing them to strive for excellence.

His efforts have not gone unnoticed.

Earlier this month, Prof Yeung, 59, received the Irwin Outstanding Educator Award from the Academy of Management in the United States which honors outstanding educators who have left deep imprints in strategic management.

Past recipients include Harvard Business School professor Roland Christensen, a leading authority on case-method teaching, and Professor Michael Porter, a leading expert on company strategy. Prof Yeung is the second Asian - the first was Pankaj Ghemawat from the IESE Business School in Barcelona - and the first from an Asian institution to win the award.
"It is based on nominations but I don't know who nominated me," he says. "The selection committee talked to my old students and colleagues to find out what my influence was on training, research, methodology and ideas," says the dean who has mentored nearly 40 PhD students, many of whom now work in prestigious universities such as Harvard, Columbia and Cornell.

"My students are known to have solid methodology and they practice the art of refusing to believe, which is very important. Academics is an accumulation of knowledge; we have to keep on changing and improving," he says.

Formerly with New York University's Stern School of Business, he became dean of the NUS Business School five years ago. He has a PhD from the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business.

He is very clear about the sort of students he hopes to produce: curious individuals who do not live in ivory towers and who do things not for their transactional value but their intrinsic value.

"You can be attracted to something because of the pay and other market signals but when you go further down, you need to be attracted by the intrinsic beauty of it all," says the self-made man who financed his own education through scholarships and part-time work, including menial labour.

A business education, he says, is more than just learning how to make money. "A job should not be just a job. It's about what you bring to the table, what the job is about and what it can do to make yours a better company or to serve society better."

It explains why he is very proud of the school's initiatives, such as the Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy. "We use it to make students aware that there are difficulties in our society. Hopefully, they will make a difference in future."

Prof Yeung believes that students can be trained to cultivate the right values and to become sensitive to issues plaguing society.

"I can see more of our students not working for a tobacco company. During orientation, we emphasize to our students how easy and how tempting it is to go over to the dark side and become Darth Vader," he says, referring to the villain in George Lucas' Star Wars films.

Studies bear this out, he says, and cites one which shows that speeding tickets are a good predictor of wrongdoing. "It shows that if you can break the law in a small way, you are also likely to do it in a major way."
Prof Yeung, who is married to a sociologist and has two adult children, is also proud of the school's efforts to make sure it is not an ivory tower but one which has its pulse on industry.

The NUS Business School Board comprises prominent leaders such as former Temasek Holdings chairman S. Dhanabalan, former head of the Singapore Exchange Hsieh Fu Hua, and group chairman of Li & Fung Limited, Mr William Fung.

Former CapitaLand head honcho Liew Mun Leong also teaches leadership and management.

"This is important not just for our students but also our faculty. These people raise the bar about the big picture; they know the challenges and trends."

If rankings are any indication, he has done a pretty good job since joining NUS five years ago.

Earlier this year, its double degree programme with the University of California, Los Angeles was ranked No. 3 globally in The Economist's inaugural Executive Master of Business Administration rankings. The school's Asia-Pacific Executive MBA, taught in English and Mandarin, was No. 43.

While he is pleased, he says it is more important that the school's growth is sustainable.

"And to do that, you must produce students who have the right personality, the vision and a mission to lead from Asia. We need business leaders who not only have the knowledge but the will to serve society."

Just like the knights errant in his favourite Wuxia novels.