

BRINGING VALUE TO THE COUNTRY

Believing that Malaysia still has untapped potential, political scientist Dr Ong Kian Ming returns to Malaysia in hopes to tap on more Blue Ocean markets locally

In the past few years, Malaysia has been grappling with the issue of “brain drain,” a situation where many of our best graduates and talents have been systematically attracted or drained out of the country, driven mainly by the perceived lack of opportunities for locals in the country.

But every so often, a handful of more-than-qualified graduates do come home, stemming brain drain tide and using their training and qualifications for the good of the country, as exemplified by Dr Ong Kian Ming, lecturer at the faculty of Economics and Policy Science (FEPS) at UCSI University.

“There are a few key reasons why I chose to come back to Malaysia,” he tells Business Today in an interview. “One of them is that I sincerely believe that Malaysia has untapped potential, and I believe that this unfulfilled potential can be realised as the country is currently at a turning point in history.”

The 35-year-old crew-cut political scientist recently obtained his Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) from Duke University, and has been busy getting his life in order after spending six long years studying in North Carolina, United States.

Besides being a lecturer in UCSI, Ong is also a consultant with UCSI’s Blue Ocean Strategy Regional Centre, as well as the founder of his own consulting firm, OKM Consulting.

Today, apart from busily shuffling between his engagements as a lecturer tasked to pilot a Master of Public Policy (MPP) degree at UCSI, Ong has also been tasked with drafting Selangor’s Blueprint Plan economic development by the Selangor State Government.

Born and bred in Petaling Jaya, Ong schooled in La Salle primary and secondary school till the age of 15, where he left to study both his “O” and “A” levels in Singapore under the island-state’s Asean Scholarship programme. Later he read his Bachelor of Science in Economics at the London School of Economics and Political Science.



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After a short stint as an intern at the Monetary Authority of Singapore, Ong returned to the UK to complete his Master in Philosophy in Economics at Cambridge University. In 1999, he began his career as a consultant with the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) in Kuala Lumpur, where he worked in the financial services and consumer goods industries covering Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia.

After two years with BCG, Ong decided to throw in the towel and follow what he believes is his true passion – political science.

“I took a huge pay cut and joined MCA’s Insap (Institute of Strategic Analysis & Policy Research), where I worked on various politically-related issues such as gerrymandering. Later, I moved to Gerakan’s Sedar (Social Economic Development and Research Institute), where I got to know a lot more people and I was given a chance to work more closely in my political research with those in the seats of power,” he says.

Asked what was it that triggered his interest in political science given that he had been trained in economics, Ong points to a time in his life in April, 1998 when Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim came to London to meet students at Malaysia Hall and delivered a speech.

Ong says amongst the many issues Malaysian students in the UK were worried about were the fallout from the Asian Financial crisis and the imprisonment of DAP opposition political leader, Lim Guan Eng, for sedition.

“It was that time that we heard Anwar speaking out against Lim’s imprisonment and we were very inspired that he spoke up for an opposition leader,” he shares. “That was the first encounter with Anwar and it was probably the seed that was planted that would grow later on after my time with BCG,” he says.

Blue Ocean, new markets

While wearing one hat as a full time lecturer is difficult enough for most people, Ong is determined to make the most of his corporate experience and training in economics and political science in all three roles he’s engaged in.



"Be my downline? What happened to valentine?"

Driven by what he describes as his passion for bringing value to everything he does, Ong says he deliberately chose to come back to Malaysia because he believes that this part of the world is still considered a "Blue Ocean" playing field.

Blue Ocean refers to a business strategy concept that posits organisations can create new demand in an uncontested market space and gain hugely from it as there are no competitors yet in that space, hence the term Blue Ocean. In contrast, organisations that compete with others in an existing, highly competitive industry, is termed Red Ocean.

"When I came back, I was approached to take up a partnership at BCG. The offer was lucrative but I declined it because I believe that what I would like to do should not only be about money. For me, making money is something that I like doing firstly as an entrepreneurial challenge and secondly, as a way of validating the value of the work I'm doing.

"Also, I believe that what I'm doing now is far more challenging than what I would have been able to experience as a consultant because everything that I do now is considered Blue Ocean for me. For example, starting the MPP course in UCSI is Blue Ocean as is the work I'm doing for the Selangor State Government."

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Ong also says that he is in a unique position to offer a value that most people in Malaysia can't, through his own political consulting company, OKM Consulting.

"For example, I've access to election polling data that I've gathered and collated as part of my PhD research over the years that enables me to make detailed analysis analyses and predictions, which I doubt most people can.

"In term of access, I believe I can have access to any politicians whom I want to meet within a certain period of time, including meeting the Prime Minister because I can offer a value to them. This is the value I bring to the table and only comes about because Malaysia is still a Blue Ocean territory for me."

Value in Everything

On his views about the economy, Ong believes that while the Malaysian budget deficit and debt is not at a critical level yet, the situation can potentially balloon out of hand.

"Malaysia still remains too dependent on oil for revenue and the civil service still remains too large for a country our size. The country is still an export-led economy, which means that we are still dependent on other countries, and the truth is that there won't be much heady economic growth around the world to help Malaysia grow."

As for his management style, Ong says that he firmly believes in leadership by example.

"For instance, I've some interns working with me on the Selangor Blueprint project and I demand a lot from them. But rather than just pushing them and sitting back, none of them can say that I don't work as hard as them, as in fact, I work twice as hard. In making my demands, I'll also be able to weed out those who are not truly passionate about what they do as I'm interested to work only with people who are passionate."

So does Ong have a philosophy in life that drives him?

"Whatever I do and wherever I go, I want to add value to the people around me, whether it's for myself, my clients, or employees. This is what drives me on in everything that I do." 