He's worried about putting cyberspace in a corner

By Chong Suk-Wai

SOCIOLIGIST Eddie Kuo was chuffed when he chanced upon a Celtic shield knot in the Oxford City Museum, a while back.

Professor Kuo, 69, recalls: "It was very similar to a Chinese knot, and showed these cultures' common threads.

The married father of two likes using the Chinese knot as a metaphor for his view that all cultures are formed from a single, unending string in open weaves.

In his 37 years here, the Xiamen-born Singaporean has founded not one but two schools within Nanyang Technological University (NTU): namely the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

He also set up the mass communications programme at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1991.

He has enhanced his communications school's standing by founding and editing the Asian Journal of Communication for the past 20 years. The school's profile helped Singapore win the right to host the International Communication Association Conference, a first for South-East Asia, which will begin next week.

Prof Kuo is retiring shortly, so I asked him to look back on his busy life:

What about new media do you find fearsome?

The rising nationalism among China's netizens is scary. All it takes is 1 per cent of them to exert pressure on the government. You could see all the forces at work in the recent hogging (strike) among factory workers there. They were able to organise through SMSes. The factory had no Internet but cellphones can now play the role of the Net. China has to tackle this problem. Maybe Singapore too, if it were in such a situation.

Hasn't Singapore had sporadic SMS campaigns too?

True, true. But they are benign and harmless, by comparison.

Perhaps that's because Singaporeans do it because they choose to, while Chinese workers do it because they have to.

While there may be hiccups here and there, those Chinese factory workers who committed suicide sacrificed themselves and triggered industrial reform. You'll soon see a massive transformation to upgrade and protect workers.

What of Singapore's relationship with new media?

Generally, the trend has been towards liberalisation. In the early 1990s, there was no cable and even CNN was allowed to report only financial news. There is some incoherence in Singapore's development that it has an open society in matters economic and political, yet in certain areas, particularly in the public area, there are controls. This being open and being closed (make for) incoherence.

What would you have the Government do?

Generally, the Government will find it convenient to continue this, but increasingly one can see it adjusting to the genuine situation. A few years ago, it set up a committee to look into new media, of which I was a member. The committee produced a report with recommendations. In the end, the Government adopted only a few recommendations. I see it as the Government's cautious response, of moving in stages.

But new media cannot really be reined in.

The Government tries to differentiate between the public media it trusts and cyberspace, which it puts aside in a corner. It would be undesirable if a smart segment of the population is driven into that corner. That would be unhealthy because when the same-minded people gather, they reinforce each other's views. So if the gap between the public media and online is big, it's dangerous.

How do we bridge that gap?

One way is to allow more of these views (that appear online) to be expressed in the mainstream media.

But these views often derive from anger, so how constructive would it be to let them vent in mainstream media? That's what I mean by undesirable. In some ways, the anger reflects the frustration leading to cynicism... People don't feel that they can participate effectively or if they attempt to participate, they may be disregarded in one way or another because they think differently. So these little things build up in school and at other levels of society.

Speaking of school, why did you forgo your academic career to set up two communications schools here?

In the late 1980s, NUS and NTU were separately set up to set up two communications schools here.

If you read The Straits Times Forum pages then, there was quite a bit of pressure from the public, like people asking, "Why should I send my kids overseas just to study that?" Nanyang Technological Institute was to become NTU and in its plans was a communications school. At that time in NUS, I was among the few who had done research and taught a communications course in the sociology department. Edwin Thumboo, then dean of the NUS arts and social science faculty, asked me to set up a communications studies programme. I had mixed feelings. I was quite comfortable with sociology... The bottom line was that NUS was competing with NTU and, quite frankly, it wanted something out quickly. I gave it some thought and then said, "Okay." I saw a future (for the course).

So how did NTU win out in the end, despite starting later?

In 1992, a year after I started the NUS programme, I was on sabbatical in Hawaii when I got a phone call telling me (the Education Ministry had decided that only NTU would offer a communications course)... It was a shock. We now had to make sure that the interests of our students and newly recruited faculty members were protected. I immediately wrote a report as to why it was more important to have the course in NUS than NTU.

So how did you come to be founding dean of the NTU school?

The moment I was back from Hawaii, my secretary said, "Dr Cham Tao Soon of NTU wants to meet you." I met him, he was very direct. I liked him a lot. He said, "Here, you see, we have a new school. I want you to be our dean." I wasn't sure, though, because my base was still in sociology. So he gave me some time to think about that.

Did you regret taking up his offer?

I told him I would start the school... on secondment from sociology. And the next time I saw Dr Cham, I came up with a list. I said, "Now, we don't have space. We don't have a budget. I don't have a secretary." Of course, he knew all that. He started things from zero too. I wanted to make sure that he made a verbal commitment. We started on the second floor of the Chinese Heritage Centre in NTU... Today, we gave our students opportunities to grow and

groom themselves.

Did you know some of these students have told me that some of their lecturers urge them to work overseas and not here?

No, I didn't. That surprises me. It depends on how my colleagues have put it to their students, right? I wouldn't be surprised if they tell them: "You have no future here. There's only The Straits Times and MediCorp. The world should be your future.

How did you go from that to starting a second NTU school?

In 2003, we had a new president, Dr Su Guaning. He asked me to open the new school. I took it up as interim dean, because to set it up would take at least six years. But I was effectively founding dean for 2½ years. I had the space, I had the budget. I had my secretary, Ha, ha!

How do you feel about retiring?

I don't think I can really see retirement as not working. Work is too big a part of life, not just for me, but others as well. So I may visit some universities in China and give talks there. ssk@ntu.edu.sg

Table Talk With Eddie Kuo

Out to shape the lives of students

SOCIOLIGIST Eddie Kuo is big on playing fair and helping everyone find their place in the sun. Here he is on:

Why he decided to make Singapore home

"It was the opportunity to be among a pioneer group... You felt you were doing something which you couldn't do in other places.""}

His pitch to pre-university students to study communications

"I said if you want a comfortable life, earn more money and don't mind a boring job, be a lawyer. But if you want excitement and have the talent to be creative, we want you."

Students from Nanyang Technological University's mass communications school

"This is a biased, non-objective view but I am very proud of them."

Why he enjoys sharing what he thinks and knows

"Well, I mean, a professor.

What a teacher should do

"Make the best out of whoever you have. What we should do is, from the time of their entry to the time of their exit, ask how much difference we have made to them."

What his students say about him these days

"That I'm old-fashioned. They want to see YouTube and I can't quite do that, but I've learnt to prepare PowerPoint slides."

His long record of public service

"It's all voluntary. Occasionally, I get to park free, but otherwise I pay for my own parking too."

The current chilly impasse in Sino-US relations

"I saw US Defense Secretary Bob Gates approach the Chinese general (at the Shangri-La Dialogue here) and they shook hands. So the dialogue is still on, and I hope they are just talking about what they do - a wink, smile or frown - has great impact globally."

Cheoing Suk-Wai