Learning to govern

By Wong Kei Hong

S E N I O R  W R I T E R

IN 2017, Mr. Liu Zhihui, 47, became the Mayor of Shenzhen in China's Guangdong province. With a population of over 13 million, the city is the largest in China in terms of land area. And the appointment came with its share of doubts.

"I heard a lot of pressure as Shenzhen is also a frontier city with many minority groups," he says in an e-mail interview. But he hoped that knowing what he had learned in his Master of Public Administration programme at Nanyang Technological University that year, he could "work hard".

For a start, he decided that the municipal government's top priority should be to enhance its administrative capacity.

"It is greatly impressed by the excellent public service provided by the Singaporean government. As far as you are concerned, our government should also launch a few projects that would benefit the public," he says.

To date, he has launched 43 such projects. Among other things, 27 new school buildings were reinforced and another 86 schools were built. A water supply project which benefited 100,000 people was also carried out. Mr Liu is one of a growing group of influential decision-makers who are keen to learn from Singapore.

The Mayor's Club refers to the Master of Science in Management Economics and the Master of Public Administration programs offered by the university's Nanyang Centre for Public Administration. The first course was launched in 1996, targeting high-potential local Chinese municipal and senior executives of state-owned enterprises. Its success led the university to launch the Master of Public Administration in 2010, for government officials being groomed as the next generation of leaders.

Earlier this year, the Mayor's Club marked its 1,000th graduate student. Mr Liu says he has benefited tremendously from the course.

"Reformist politicians and renowned scholars were invited to talk to us," he says, referring to guest lecturers including former ministers Yusof Ishak and Yio Si Kuan. In 2014, the permanent secretary general of the Prime Minister's Office Ng Eng Hen and former permanent secretary C Yong Tong Doo, as well as former CEO of the Urban Redevelopment Authority, then Mayor of Singapore, Mr Tony Tan, were also guest lecturers.

"We were also given the opportunity to visit different government departments and local enterprises. The officials and the executives shared with us their working experiences.

"Meanwhile, Mr Zhao Lijun, 55, Mayor of Xi'an city in Shaanxi province, graduated from the Master of Management Economics programme in 2001. She was sent here by her provincial government.

The Mayor, who has a law degree from the South-west China University of Political Science and Law in Chongqing, called the training "helpful" and practical.

"My husband, who is a lawyer, came to study the same course at his own expense after my graduation," she says.

Besides the mayor's programme, the Nanyang Centre offers short-term executive training programmes in public administration, economic management, urban planning and community planning which have been attended by more than 10,000 officials.

NTU is also the only university in Singapore to offer a double-degree in management economics and public administration, Nanyang Medicine. Students go through a three-year long course in Biological Sciences courses at NTU before studying MBBS at the University of California, Irvine.

NTU has set its sights on becoming a vital knowledge hub that combines the best of the East and West, an initiative it calls the New Silk Route.

It hopes to leverage on its engagement with China, India and South-East Asia to exploit the rapid flow of ideas and talent in the region, and in the East that will shape the course of the 21st century. The NTU's firm's foothold in South-East Asia will be even more strangle with the setting up of the NTU Tianjin College in the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco City, a strategic collaborative effort between the two governments.

To open in 2013, the college will offer postgraduate courses in environmental and water technologies, digital animation, business and finance. The institution hopes it will also be an additional channel to recruit top PhD students.

NTU president, Dr. Lui, says that besides China, NTU plans to go into India and the Middle East, the rest of Asia soon.

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Sources: www.ntu.edu.sg