



(From left) Yale student Rayner Teo, 23; timekeeper Christopher Pagliarella, 21; moderator and Yale alumnus Lim Tse Yang, 25; doctoral student Ng E-Ching, 33; student Dana Miller, 23; and NUS exchange student Goh Wee Shian, 24, at the Yale dialogue. PHOTO: REUBEN NG

# S'poreans at Yale clear air on freedom

They relate own experiences in S'pore in closed-door dialogue to counter misperceptions

BY MATTHIAS CHEW & STACEY CHIA

WHEN Ms Ng E-Ching was teaching General Paper at a top junior college in Singapore, she would give controversial articles, even one from a banned magazine, to her students for discussion.

She was not stopped or censored for it, the 33-year-old doctoral student wrote in a Yale University student newspaper, the *Yale Daily News*, earlier this month.

Yesterday, Ms Ng, who also did her undergraduate liberal arts degree at the university, again pointed out that in Singapore, "experience of academic freedom is very highly dependent on your immediate boss".

She made the point at a closed-door dialogue at Yale University in the United States early yesterday morning with about 50 students and faculty members, she told *The Straits Times* later.

Also relating his experience, National University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate Goh Wee Shian, 24, who is on an exchange programme at Yale, said that at the NUS campus, students can freely express their views on all topics, "including government policies".

Academic freedom was one of the three main issues raised at the hour-long dialogue organised by Ms Ng and other Singaporean Yale students and alumni.

It was held to counter what many see as simplistic and stereotyped views of Singapore held by some members of the Yale community.

Many Singaporeans have argued that these views do not reflect the country's complex reality.

The exchange follows a resolution passed by the Yale faculty two weeks ago, calling for civil liberties to be guaranteed at the new Yale-NUS college in Singapore due to open next year.

The resolution reignites the debate that erupted when the joint venture was announced in 2010.

But at yesterday's dialogue, the tone was less adversarial, and more inquiring.

Questions to the five Singaporean panellists sought to find out the impact of foreign student quotas on student diversity, and the challenges of setting up a liberal arts college in a country without America's constitutional protection of free speech.

A faculty member was concerned that the new college may not be diverse enough, as the foreign student number is capped at 15 per cent of the cohort.

Yale-NUS dean of admissions Jeremiah Quinlan rose to clear the air.

He said the cap applied to NUS as a whole, not to Yale-NUS in particular. "Just as individual faculties at NUS might have different compositions of their student bodies, so too can Yale-NUS."

He added that the majority of Yale-NUS students will be Singaporeans, with the exact composition determined by the quality of the applicants.

On whether a liberal arts college can take off in Singapore, Ms Ng said many in Singapore still view the arts as a "second-class option" and mistake "liberal arts" for being both liberal and artistic.

She hopes that Yale-NUS can change such perceptions.

Her brother Yi-Sheng, 31, a writer who took part via video-conferencing from Singapore, found the atmosphere cordial. "The sense I get is that everyone was just interested," he said.

Mr Reuben Ng, 30, a doctoral student in public health at Yale, said he attended the dialogue to support the idea behind it. "I wanted to add the Singaporean perspectives to a burgeoning discussion that is disproportionately American."

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