

Connecting S'poreans to their Chinese heritage

SHE is a leading expert on the Chinese diaspora, so it is no wonder that Professor Zhou Min, the new director of the Chinese Heritage Centre at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), wishes for Singapore Chinese, particularly young folk, to learn more about their heritage.

The sociologist hopes the centre can engage clan associations' youth groups to meet the needs of a generation that feels little affinity to Chinese language or culture.

It is a challenge she knows well. Her only child, Dr Philip Guo, who moved from China to the United States at five, "probably remembers only 50 Chinese characters", she laments.

Still, Prof Zhou, also head of NTU's sociology division, says her son, now a 30-year-old assistant professor of computer science

at the University of Rochester, got the best of both cultures.

"He values education, hard work, discipline and the family's face," she says. "On the other hand, he has fully utilised the freedom that he has in America. He can do whatever his heart desires, not like the first generation."

There is a further personal dimension in encouraging greater understanding among Singaporeans of their Chinese heritage.

Prof Zhou, who hails from Guangdong originally but counts herself American after living 29 years in the US, is rediscovering her Chinese-ness since moving here six months ago to her university post, and then becoming centre director on Nov 1.

One reason is that although she looks ethnically similar to Singaporean Chinese, she finds them no-

ting her differences.

While in the US, the Chinese are seen as a model minority, in Singapore, "the new Chinese immigrants have a certain stereotype that works to their disadvantage", she says, citing "micro-aggressions" from others in everyday speech and actions that are subjective and hard to prove.

"In the US, you can blame it on racism. Here, you feel the same way, except that it's not racial."

Chinese New Year in the US has been low-key for her, living in a white middle-class neighbourhood and with school still in session. A weekend party with Chinese friends would do.

Over here, she soaked in the festivities in Chinatown: "It's mind-boggling how Chinese it is. It's more Chinese than in China - all the shops and decorations!"

Prof Zhou thinks young people here may find it beneficial to rediscover their roots, as many do not know how their forebears came out of China, and remitted money to support families and build *qiaoxiang* or migrant hometowns.

"Knowing (this) would help (them) connect to their cultural and heritage roots as well as bridge the generational gap, by making them more appreciative of what their parents and grandparents have done for the family."

"It would enrich their cultural sensitivity and help them expand their career horizon into China."

Prof Zhou hopes to translate into English, Chinese-language writings about *qiaoxiang* by scholars in China which cover topics such as how the Chinese bypassed the Chinese Exclusion Act, a US federal law in 1882 to bar Chinese work-

ers from entry; remittances of early Chinese immigrants in the US to Taishan city in Guangdong; and overseas Chinese newsletters by which Chinese immigrants connected to families back home.

The centre is also translating a book on Chinese migration and resettlement in Malaya and Singapore by the late Shanghai-born cartoonist, scholar and ink painter Huang Yao, who settled in Malaya in 1956.

The English edition of his 1967 work, *Ma Xin Hua Ren Zhi* or *The History of Chinese People in Malaya and Singapore*, is scheduled for completion by September this year, with a \$45,000 gift from the Huang Yao Foundation.

Besides translation, Prof Zhou plans to tap NTU faculty for expertise to create a bilingual robot for the centre's museum that appeals



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to pre-schoolers, and convert its library collection of early Chinese textbooks into digital form, to stimulate research on Chinese identity and language teaching.

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