

## Becoming Asian Public Intellectuals: Reflections from a Roundtable

By Francis Loh Kok Wah

A roundtable: *From API Fellows to Asian Public Intellectuals* was held on the last day of the Workshop. It was an opportunity for current Fellows to share with one another how the Fellowship experience had allowed each of them to investigate not only the questions of globalization, human security and cultural identity, but how this investigation and experience conducted in at least another Asian country might have facilitated the Fellow's journey in becoming an Asian Public Intellectual. It was also an opportunity to learn about the journeys of past Fellows, a number of whom were present at the Roundtable.

Each Fellow was required to prepare a 1-2 page Reflection paper that addressed some of the following questions:

- To what extent do you think more like an **Asian** (rather than like a Malaysian or Thai) nowadays? How so? Do you consider this a step forward? How do you intend to network with other like-minded Asian people in future?
- How will you (especially in the case of the academics) be engaging with the **Public** in the future, in contrast to previously? Will you be doing so as an individual or as part of a group? Or both?
- To what extent have you become more **Intellectual**, thoughtful, reflective about everyday practices that you used to perform spontaneously previously? How does the problem that you investigated during this Fellowship year link up to the wider issues of globalization, human security and cultural identity intellectually? Indeed, what is the 'value added' of your findings to the existing knowledge that we possess on these issues?
- As you project yourself as an **Asian Public Intellectual** in the future, what might be the value of your contribution to the wider society? What might be the political and other related pitfalls anticipated?
- How might working as an API Community enhance your contribution to transformation of our Asian society?

To facilitate participation by all, the participants were divided into three small groups of approximately 10-13 people each, comprising current as well as past Fellows, as well as members of the API Selection Committee and Country Programs. Surichai Wun'Geao, Mary Rachelis and Francis Loh acted as facilitators. After an hour and a half of intensive discussion, the three break-up sessions came together. Summaries of each group's discussion were presented. Thereafter there occurred open discussion.

The group discussions were lively and enlightening as everyone actively participated in giving his/her view about what they had acquired from the Fellowship and also the Workshop. There was no noticeable gender or age gap; in fact, the female participants were among the most active. Also, the facilitators did a good job in involving everyone in the discussion and managing the flow of it. Three broad themes emerged from the group discussions: receptiveness to diversity and commonality, the Asian versus Western way of doing things, and the responsibility of becoming an API fellow.

### *Discovering Diversity and Commonality*

The opportunity to live in another country or countries for up to a year had changed the way the Fellows now look at those host countries. Many misconceptions and myths were dispelled once they had the first-hand experience of living in and immersing themselves in the culture and society of other countries. They discovered many commonalities and mutual problems between their own native country and the host countries, and realized that the various Asian people are not so different after all. People in general share similar day-to-day concerns regardless of their disparate locations. Also, being embedded within a foreign community for a year allowed the Fellows to be more open to other people's points of views as they experienced the realities that shape those views in the first place. The experience provided them with the cross-cultural tools necessary for a sounder analysis of their chosen research topic, indeed, of the way they looked at their own societies too.

For many, the one-year experience also shattered romantic and idealized perspectives the Fellows had of 'others' in Asia before conducting their fieldwork. It was clear from the Roundtable discussions that the Fellows now hold a more realistic yet critical view of their host country or countries. To that extent, the year-long cultural immersion and daily interactions with the locals elsewhere in Asia had broadened the views of the Fellows. Often, these experiences raised questions on how the Fellows looked at their own countries too.

### *Asian vs Western?*

Many expressed the sentiment that these experiences had made them more appreciative about being Asians, and that this had been achieved first-hand and not via some CNN or National Geographic documentary about those 'others'. Nor did they need to find out more about their neighbours via a western scholar acting as intermediary. Hence they were highly appreciative that the API programme had provided the opportunity not only to hear other Asian points of view, but facilitated Asian scholars taking centre stage and engaging directly with the region. Indeed, API also allows for Global South perspectives to be heard. It was recognized that there existed differences among Asians on all the three as well as other topics. Significantly, however, we were discovering these differences ourselves, again, not via western intermediaries. In this regard, the participants were relieved that the Workshop was not dominated by Western-centric scholars either. One participant came up with the pithy remark that 'we have to know who we are first before learning about them.'

That said, there were also some disturbing comments made by the Fellows on this subject. For example, some Fellows' new awareness about being Asian amounted to discovering that Asians (as opposed to westerners, presumably) are more respectful of others, especially our elders; that we present our name cards two-handedly; and that in meetings and decision-making we always try to reach a consensus rather than force our opinions onto others!

In this regard, some Fellows lamented that this API Workshop had been organized 'like any other academic conference in the West' and that the Workshop should have been organized according to 'our

Asian way' instead, by which was meant, presumably, 'giving more time and leeway to the post-Workshop conversations among Fellows', usually conducted over food and drinks 'in a more laid-back and informal Asian way'. Ideas and insights, it was claimed, were flowing more freely during this time as compared to during the formal Workshop sessions, which were deemed too rigid and stifling, if not 'western'. Fortunately, some other Fellows correctly opined that these caricatures were at best 'stereotypes'; and if indeed, these were what they some Fellows considered as 'Asian ways', they ought to be re-examined.

#### *Combining advocacy and study, local and regional*

Another topic of debate concerned the transforming one's self from an API Fellow to an Asian Public Intellectual. Yes, it was apparent to all that one's participation in the API Programme does not stop at the conclusion of the Penang Workshop. Fellows were also aware of the need to combine both academic research and advocacy and not simply retreat back into their comfortable milieu if that was so prior to assuming this Fellowship. It was encouraging that the Fellows also realized that they needed to reach out to people outside their immediate circles. It was also agreed that academics need to employ populist language when talking to the general population while the activists need to infuse their advocacy with rigorous research so they do not end up as shrilled voices howling empty rhetoric.

But there was also concern regarding the ability to juggle their regular work while transforming themselves to play this new role. Most of the activists already have a lot on their plate so to speak and they might feel overwhelmed by new demands that they expand their scope from the national to the regional. They thought that it would be difficult to sustain lasting collaborations with like-minded groups/people in other countries given that everyone is swamped with the issues within their own country, and can only allocate limited resources to other groups/people from outside. Still, they appreciated the opportunity given by the API Programme, which allowed them to interact with like-minded groups/people from other countries, and to learn a few new things that can be implemented in their own local setting.

#### *Summing-up*

The Workshop Director Francis Loh responded to the above three points. First, he addressed the question of 'becoming Asian'. He expressed concern that some of the Fellows had resorted to notions of Asian essentialisms earlier. In fact, these 'Asian ways', or 'Asian values' including the notion of 'Asian democracy' are constructs of the political elites and their intelligentsia seeking to establish their hegemony over the rest of the people. For, surely, we do not subscribe to the notion that as Asians we are happy with Asian-styled democracy that are not imbued with more universal (for the elites 'western') notions of human rights, justice and freedom, equality for all regardless of class, colour, creed, gender and age! Or is it that Asians do not care for more transparent, accountable, representative and participatory governments? The challenge for the Fellows, therefore, is to propose and advocate a different set of values and norms on how to construct our Asian-ness, and not take those so-called essentialisms promoted and maintained by the elites as 'givens'. It must be *a project in*

*progress* for the API Fellows as they seek to transform themselves into Asian public intellectuals who will prioritise serving the interests and needs of the Asian masses, and the transformation of Asian societies.

Second, Loh opined that promoting the interests and needs of the Asian masses, including women; protecting our environment from the ravages of global capitalism; and standing up for the cultures and religions of the minorities is in the spirit of our becoming *public* intellectuals. In this regard, Loh welcomed the awareness among Fellows that they must engage with society. No doubt, a great sense of this commitment prevailed among most Fellows. Admittedly, it will not be easy to juggle our existing and the proposed new roles, as recognized by the Fellows.

And third, although almost all were aware that this activism must be combined with intellectual investigation and reflection, Loh sensed that there were suggestions from the earlier discussions that the Fellows had not been thoughtful enough about the question of being an intellectual. In particular, he was disturbed by the notion among some Fellows that there was one Western way of exchanging ideas, and another Asian one of doing so. For Loh, it was unfortunate that a group of Fellows were shying away from rigorous intellectual reflection on the topics that they had investigated. One of the outputs of the API Fellowship programme – which gives activists time off to conduct academic-style research, and academics the opportunity to reach down to the grassroots, he suggested, ought to be new insights derived from our special standing as ‘public intellectuals’, or ‘scholar-activists’, coupled to a comparative study of one’s own country and the experiences one had gained from conducting research in another country.

When one takes into consideration the accumulated and comparative action-research of twenty-odd Fellows every year over the past 10 years, there ought to be some ‘value-added’ to this body of knowledge about Asian affairs, perhaps of some theoretical significance too. For Loh, this was what made the API Fellowship programme special, viz. that a group of Asian public intellectuals or scholar activists could potentially offer new insights into the issues of globalization, human security and cultural identity that could not only transform Asian societies for the better, but also shake up the academic world with some new theoretical insights. Yet here we were talking about how insights and ideas flow better among Asians in non-formal settings over food and drinks during post-Workshop hours!

In this regard, there is need for the Fellows (as well as other Asian scholar-activists who do not belong to the API programme) to propose an alternative set of values and norms that can transform our societies for the better; to advocate for the realization of these values in projects, policies and institutions; *and* to make a special contribution to the realm of knowledge derived from our commitment to be scholar-activists. A start to the last item, perhaps, is to dig into the case studies that the hundreds of API Fellows have already conducted, in order to build upon the existing knowledge, and to tease out whatever theoretical insights they might offer. This would also be an important aspect of transforming ourselves into Asian Public Intellectuals, he concluded.