A thinker and realist rolled into one

By Neo Ping May

The School of Humanities and Social Sciences in NTU will produce public policy-makers who are not only well-versed in social theory, political systems theory, and global affairs, but also understand the reality on the ground. This will make them adept at crafting policies that can help improve the lives of ordinary citizens.

This is Prof He Baogang’s vision for the School’s upcoming new Public Policy and Global Affairs (PPGA) undergraduate degree programme. He joined NTU this January to spearhead the development and launch of the new programme.

The four-year interdisciplinary direct honours degree is the first of its kind in Singapore. It combines the study of public policy, public administration, and global affairs.

“I hope to produce graduates who know what is happening on the ground – not just in books but on the ground,” said Prof He. “We need graduates who are master theorists, who know what is going on, and who are able to combine theory and practice to produce policies that are beneficial to society and the community.”

Prof He himself is one such scholar.

An authority on Chinese democratisation, Non-Governmental Organisations, and local governance, Prof He was awarded the Harry Mayer prize by the Australian Political Association in 1994. He has also gained international recognition in the fields of international relations and Asian Studies.

In his younger days, he studied philosophy for his bachelor’s and master’s degrees, but switched his focus to political science when he did his Ph.D. at Australian National University in 1988.

The reason?

He had developed a liking for more grounded, empirical research – for investigative work guided by observation and experiment.

“Philosophers make arguments, but you have to deal with empirical work nowadays, and you can’t just have a grand idea,” he said.

Thus a large component of his research involves fieldwork recording and observation.
In 2001, the United Nations invited him to review its China Rural Official Training program. He was also invited by the Danish International Development Agency to examine a political reform project in China in 2003, and to examine the procedures for direct township elections in 2004.

Much of his empirical research is linked to large ideals such as civil society and democracy, and he has also attempted to test, modify and develop different theoretical hypotheses.

He also served as an advisor to Chinese local governments for village elections, to the Wenling government for the set up of deliberative institutions, and to the Dejiang community for the building of deliberative discussion forums.

Prior to joining NTU, Prof He was the Chair of International Studies at Deakin University, Australia. He feels that Singapore, placed at the geographical intersection between the East and West, is the perfect location for research on the various hybrids of democracy models, and for the formulation of a “best practices” model of democracy.

Prof He’s books include Rural Democracy in China; Democratic Theory: Predicament and Transcendence; and Deliberative Democracy: Theory, Method and Practice.