

Singapore Management University
Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Digital Narratives of Asia

Institute for Societal Leadership

3-8-2017

George Yeo [Singapore, Minister of Foreign Affairs]

George Yeo

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/isl_dna

Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Citation

Yeo, George. George Yeo [Singapore, Minister of Foreign Affairs]. (2017). 1-13. Digital Narratives of Asia.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/isl_dna/31

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Societal Leadership at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Digital Narratives of Asia by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email libIR@smu.edu.sg.

Interviewee: **GEORGE YEO**

Interviewer: Sharon Tong

Date: 3 Aug 2017

Location: Singapore

00:00:20

[Sharon Tong](#)

Thank you so much for spending your time, sharing your experiences as a leader here. Now you have been wearing many hats, you were a military leader, a political leader as a minister before and currently, you are a business leader. So, how different are these experiences of yours?

00:00:38

[George Yeo](#)

Somehow, I don't resonate very well when you use the word leader. I mean yes, I was in the army and air force, I had certain responsibilities, but I always worked with people. I don't quite associate with the word 'leader' with a capital L. My reaction may describe my own attitude towards leadership. That it's always collective work and if we're able to achieve anything it's because others have worked with you. You were able to align what you want to do with what they are prepared to do. Then you're able to make certain achievements.

00:01:18

[Sharon Tong](#)

What was your favourite? When you were in the military, in politics or currently, in business in the private sector?

00:01:25

[George Yeo](#)

I have thought over that question many a times. I find it difficult to point to somebody and say, well, I want to be like him. I think depending on the situation, you need different kinds of leaders. And it's not as if a person can lead in all situations. In some situations, it's better to have a young person leading you. In other situations, it may be better to have a commando, or a professor. I can probably do certain things in certain situations. But I won't be able to do many things in many situations.

00:02:10

[Sharon Tong](#)

You're saying that when you were in politics, you needed different sets of skills than you use now as a business leader?

00:02:25

[George Yeo](#)

I got to work within what I am, and it's the same person in whatever role that I play. I don't think I've changed. I don't think people can change very much. It's like you attend an old school reunion and you meet old classmates, we're all much older now. But after five minutes, you come a conclusion that no one has changed. That's probably how they see you too. I don't think we can change very much.

00:02:51

[Sharon Tong](#)

I remember in terms of values, the values that you carry into the various roles that you play. You talked about being a Chinese, and you had a bit of an affinity to the Taoist values, system. And you're also a Christian, a Catholic. How far do these values, do they drive how you are, in the various areas?

00:03:25

[George Yeo](#)

Being Chinese is a very important part of my identity and I certainly hope that I've transmitted that identity to my children. If they don't feel Chinese, I would have in my own view, failed as a father. That's important to me. I'm also a Christian, a Catholic. But I accept that in matters of religious beliefs, every individual must make his own judgement and decision. I'm animated by certain deep values which won't change very much. Being Chinese is about having a Confucianist view of the world that you need relationships. You need to observe protocols. You need a historical view of things. But also to accept that, as a Taoist, there's always forces much larger than us, affecting our room for manoeuvre, affecting our ability to be free. Recognising this necessity is absolutely importance. We're all nested within larger forces, which are completely beyond our control. We can't change the seasons, we can't alter the rotation of the earth or its revolution around the sun. You have to accept that as reality. The seasons change, we grow older. These are unalterable. But, within where we are, there is room for manoeuvre. One philosopher, I think it was Friedrich Engels, who said 'freedom is a recognition of necessity'. I've always accepted that at the core, which is why I'm quite happy to describe myself as a philosophical Taoist.

00:05:11

[Sharon Tong](#)

How far does that affect the kind of decisions that you make on a daily basis? In your capacity let's say.

00:05:19

[George Yeo](#)

Very much. You know that famous prayer that... You do the things you can, you accept what you cannot change, you pray for the wisdom to know in which situation you are in. So always understand what is very difficult to change and work within it. In your relationships, or in a particular situation. It's an analysis of forces. You read it in Sun Zi

Bing Fa, you must know the situation, you must know your opponent, and you must know yourself. And then, within this knowledge, you find your room for manoeuvre.

00:06:08

[Sharon Tong](#)

Let's just talk about your time as Minister of Foreign Affairs. What do you think are some of the biggest lessons you learnt about diplomacy, about statecraft, during that period of your career?

00:06:25

[George Yeo](#)

Relationships are very important, and one should never neglect nurturing relationships. The former US Secretary of State, George Shultz, put it very well, when he explained that a large part of foreign policy is gardening work. If you do your gardening, then the problems stay small. When there are problems, they can be kept small. But if you neglect the gardening, then suddenly things happen. Small things become big. Little efforts, which would have been sufficient, are no longer enough. So, gardening is very important. One must also be an absolute realist in foreign policy. There are big forces at play. You must understand them. People are animated by all kinds of things. When you're dealing with a particular country, or individual, understanding background, history, is absolutely important. Then you know what's important to the other person, and you must know what is important to you. What is not important to you, you're prepared to trade for something which is more important to you. That's how we can achieve win-win outcomes. Respect, understanding of the other party, is absolutely critical, in the search for win-win solutions.

00:07:52

[Sharon Tong](#)

What are some of your biggest challenges at that time?

00:07:55

[George Yeo](#)

When I became Foreign Minister, the biggest problem was our relations with China after DPM Lee Hsien Loong's visit to Taiwan, which was played up way beyond what was allowable, which caused problems for China. To which they reacted in a very robust way. That was my first responsibility, which was to re-establish good relations with China.

00:08:19

[Sharon Tong](#)

What did you learn from that episode?

00:08:26

[George Yeo](#)

Well, specifically with China, the signals are subtle, the process of accommodation takes time. One must be patient. One must be a good listener, and pick up nuances along the way, accepting that they will also do the same on their side. When we deal with the Chinese, the Chinese side of us comes into play. It's different if you're dealing with say India or Australia or Indonesia. Part of the strength of being Singaporean, is a certain multi-channel facility that we know in this situation, we should be differently nuanced. We do this every day, and we do this almost subconsciously.

00:09:09

[Sharon Tong](#)

Given China's position right now. What do you think are the challenges to ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), given China, not just China, China and India, the so-called superpowers of the region, what do you think are ASEAN's challenges moving ahead?

00:09:29

[George Yeo](#)

The rise of China is the single biggest thing happening on earth today. I describe it this way - it's as if another sun is entering the solar system. When another sun enters the solar system, it alters the gravitational field, and the orbital freedom of every planetary body, of every planet, every asteroid, every comet in the solar system. This sun is growing very fast. It will eventually become bigger than the original sun. It will create a completely different dispensation all around us. This gives us an extraordinary opportunity to choose. It's also very dangerous. But no one can afford to do nothing because even if you do nothing, you are affected. It's important to be conscious of the forces at play. That this is something big, something which affects us in every way. In a thoughtful way, respond to a new situation. It is a new situation, there's no going back to the past. Specifically, as to how China would behave, China is in some ways very predictable because its history goes through cycles of 2 to 300 years. You can almost in some situations, predict pretty accurately, how the Chinese will react. They are not like the Americans. The Americans have this almost innocent view that the whole world should be like them. They'll go to Iraq, they'll go to Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and they hope that everybody can become American and democratic and will all live happily after. The Chinese, who are an old civilization, they know that's not possible and that if you tried to do that, far from improving the situation, you make it worse. Their approach is - - I have enough difficulties in my own family, please look after yours. I'm in no position to tell you what to do. But whatever happens, as neighbours, if we can cooperate, let's cooperate and help each other. That's their approach.

00:11:43

[Sharon Tong](#)

What about the rest of ASEAN, the other member nations? Traditionally, there is this policy of...

00:11:50

[George Yeo](#)

Going back to the new sun entering the solar system. We are a cluster of planets very close to the new sun. And it shows in everything. In the tourist arrivals, in our trade accounts, in investment flows, so no one wants China as an enemy because everyone wants China as a market, as an investor, as a trading partner, as a source of tourist arrivals. In an interesting way, the closer you are to China, the more you want the Americans and the Europeans and the Japanese to be present too, because then it gives you more bargaining space, more room for manoeuvre. I think the Chinese understand this. I remember when Zhu Rongji proposed the free trade agreement between China and ASEAN in the year 2010. The framework of the agreement was signed in 2012 in Phnom Penh. Zhu Rongji, during the signing ceremony said, "China does not expect to seek for itself... an exclusive position in Southeast Asia." In other words, China knows that the more relaxed you are in your relationships, the better our bilateral relationship will be. If a neighbour of China is trapped in the relationship, like North Korea, it is not a healthy relationship and it is a tense relationship.

00:13:13

[Sharon Tong](#)

During your tenure as a Foreign Affairs Minister, ASEAN leaders actually adopted the AEC (ASEAN Economic Community) blueprint. And last year, they launched the AEC. What do you think ASEAN could do to further break the barriers of this economic integration?

00:13:35

[George Yeo](#)

We're making progress year by year. AEC last year was not a dramatic moment. It was just a milestone that we have registered for ourselves. We were converging on to it for many years. There's still a long way to go as a journey. A mutual recognition of standards, services, trade, creating greater trust, border procedures. These things will take time. We're getting better and better. ASEAN has a flexible geometry. It's not rigid. It's got a loose structure, so we allow for divergencies. You can have a military government in Thailand, you can have a Duterte in the Philippines. ASEAN adjusts. It is like 10 boats rafted together. A wave will come, but we find our balance without breaking off. That's ASEAN. If we were rigid like the EU (European Union), we will break up. The reason why we are what we are is because we adapt flexibly. There're forces much larger than us, which affect us, and are not within our control.

00:14:47

[Sharon Tong](#)

Because you were there when it was first developed, do you think AEC is going the way you feel that it should go?

00:14:58

[George Yeo](#)

ASEAN has been a remarkable success. We're entering fiftieth year. There is much to celebrate. The most important achievement of ASEAN is maintaining the peace in Southeast Asia. For years, Southeast Asia was divided into two halves because of the war in Indochina. That's over and now from Vietnam all the way to Papua, from Myanmar to Mindanao, we have a zone of relative peace. Even though there are differences, bilateral conflicts, challenges, changes of government, coups, but the habit of meeting, of accommodating each other, of not overly judging each other, or accepting diversity, that has become ingrained in us. It helped us in our adjustment to a changing world.

00:15:49

[Sharon Tong](#)

The policy of non-intervention, is it still relevant?

00:15:53

[George Yeo](#)

Oh absolutely. We are neighbours in a village. If we are constantly poking our noses in each other's affair, it will be a very unhappy village. But we are neighbours, we got to look after common areas. We got to maintain a certain civility. We must have gotong royong. That's what ASEAN is.

00:16:09

[Sharon Tong](#)

You don't think that this policy of non-interference is making it difficult to tackle certain issues for example, trans-boundary haze? Or even the issues of Myanmar previously?

00:16:24

[George Yeo](#)

No, it helps. In fact, without ASEAN, the miracle we have seen in Myanmar, of a peaceful transition could not have happened.

00:16:31

[Sharon Tong](#)

Were there challenges created because of...

00:16:32

[George Yeo](#)

The mutual non-interference is not an absolute principle. When they were shooting monks in Yangon in 2008, Singapore was in the chair. We took a very firm position expressing our common revulsion. When they kept on talking about a time table to democracy, without a timeline, we told them it was not credible. There was moral pressure, there was peer pressure. There were discussions. In every ASEAN meeting they attended, they came under pressure. We did not force them, we expressed our

views. They gave their reasons. We gave our responses to their explanations. The pressure was maintained, by persuasion, by osmosis, through friendship, through mutual affection. We do influence one another. But we don't send commandos across. We don't embargo. We don't put pressure, apply sanctions. No, we don't do that. The western powers wanted us to do that against the military government in Myanmar. We refused. Then when the change finally happened. Foreign minister of a major European country, who has also stepped down like me, we had lunch in Europe. He said, "So you were right after all." They considered that, the approach of engagement, in the end facilitated the transition. If it had been ideological doctrinaire embargo, the situation would have become worse. This peaceful transition could not had happened. Indonesia went through hell after the Asian Financial Crisis. Suharto had to resign, new dispensation, a succession of not very stable administrations. But in the end, today we have an Indonesia which is full of hope. All that within the framework of ASEAN. Keeping the place intact, keeping out external interference and maintaining the overall peace and conditions for cooperation and progress. ASEAN has been remarkable.

00:18:28

[Sharon Tong](#)

You mentioned Myanmar. ASEAN has engaged Myanmar previously. How has Singapore's engagement with Myanmar, evolved over time? How do you see it has changed over time?

00:18:46

[George Yeo](#)

We took a practical view. I remember accompanying Lee Kuan Yew to Myanmar in 1986. I was still in the SAF as a colonel. Ne Win was his host. They knew each other from way back. Lee Kuan Yew in one of the dinner speeches said, "Though we have taken different paths, we wish you all the best." It was a mild criticism expressed with affection. Both sides determined to keep good relations. After that, it got worse, the military government became rigid, sometimes very harsh. We had to hold our noses. Then when something terrible happened, like the Yangon shootings, we took a clear position. Then when I came back, I went to the Burmese temple at Ah Hood Road and I met Aung San Suu Kyi supporters to signal that, no, our support for the government does not mean that we don't support the other people who live in Myanmar. In the end, we became friends with all sides. I invited Aung San Suu Kyi for the Singapore Summit. She came, and she expressed great friendship towards the Singapore people. We still have our links to the military. That is what a good neighbour should be. To be a conciliator, not to add fuel to the fire, not to whisper and make things worse. But to help family members come together again.

00:20:18

[Sharon Tong](#)

It's this quality within ASEAN you feel that has allowed the region to succeed, as you said, in comparison?

00:20:27

[George Yeo](#)

I think there's such an instinct. There's a feeling that, look, I know it's hard enough for you within your family. We should not make things harder for you. We should in fact try to make things easier for you. I hope that when it's our turn, you would do the same for me.

00:20:44

[Sharon Tong](#)

With Myanmar opening up, more opportunities, what kind of challenges as well as opportunities does it present for the rest of the region?

00:20:56

[George Yeo](#)

Myanmar is the last piece brought into the 21st century in Southeast Asia. It shares a long border with India and China. Both are now building infrastructure into Myanmar. Myanmar will enable ASEAN to be a connector between China and India. This is a very big deal. If we have good relations with both India and China, and both are rising powers. By 2050, China is likely to be the biggest economy in the world. India will be the second. Certainly, it will at least be the third. We are right in between. It will bring prosperity to the entire region, provided we don't do silly things to ourselves.

00:21:47

[Sharon Tong](#)

Any challenges you see to what's happening in Myanmar? Its opening up and all that. Do you see any...?

00:21:53

[George Yeo](#)

Huge challenges. They have been kept back for so long. It will take them a generation before getting things fully sorted out. The relationship between the army and the state structure, the many minority groups who are still armed, who would not be disarmed because of the distrust. There's a problem in the Rakhine State. There's a problem with the economic development of inadequate administrative capacity, and Aung San Suu Kyi's successors...

00:22:24

[Sharon Tong](#)

How do you think the rest of the ASEAN can... is there a place for the rest of ASEAN to help mitigate these challenges?

00:22:33

[George Yeo](#)

We should always be helpful. We should not interfere, but we should always be helpful. Trade between Thailand and Myanmar are growing. The border crossing at Tachilek, Singapore, and other countries are all doing what they can to add capacity, to train. Chinese are helping a lot, so too are the Japanese and others.

00:22:56

[Sharon Tong](#)

Can I go back to what you brought up about the demonstrations in Myanmar? What were your considerations on how much pressure to put on the Myanmar government at that time?

00:23:10

[George Yeo](#)

I remember at that time, we were all in New York with the foreign ministers. Lee Kuan Yew called me up, I was walking on the pavement in New York. He said, "ASEAN has to take a position." I knew we had to. We had called a meeting and I drafted a statement. I said, "It's a statement of the nine on the tenth." But at the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting, some of my ASEAN colleagues said, "Why not make it an ASEAN statement?" I looked at the Myanmar foreign minister U Nyan Win, I said, "What do you think?", because I do not want to put him in a spot for speaking up against his own country. He said, "Make it an ASEAN statement." When he said that, naturally, we were happy, but I was also worried for him. Immediately after that, the international media, they were present in huge numbers, was going to come into the room for us to read out our statement. So I turned to U Nyan Win and said, "Look, you don't have to be here if you don't wish to be." He said, "I have a meeting, but my senior officer will be here." With all ten of us in a row, all ten flags flying, including Myanmar, we issued a statement, a very strong statement against the government in Myanmar. I must say I worried a lot for my friend. But he was fine, and we just had lunch in Hong Kong recently. We recounted old times.

00:24:36

[Sharon Tong](#)

You said you worried a lot for your friend.

00:24:37

[George Yeo](#)

Yes, you are the foreign minister of your country and you agree to ASEAN as a whole, criticizing the actions of your government in a very strong way, and you associated yourself with that statement, and became a party to it. I was very careful not to put him in that position or to pressure him. In fact, at all points, I gave him a way out.

00:25:03

[Sharon Tong](#)

What were the kind of challenges to getting all the member nations to agree to that statement?

00:25:13
[George Yeo](#)

The other nine was not difficult at all because the feeling was widespread. Everyone felt that it was right for us to take a position.

00:25:21
[Sharon Tong](#)

Were they similarly concerned with how their colleague would take it?

00:25:29
[George Yeo](#)

I don't think so. [Laugh] I don't think so. No.

00:25:31
[Sharon Tong](#)

So why were you then?

00:25:33
[George Yeo](#)

I was in the chair. Therefore, I was in the position of a unique responsibility at that time.

00:25:41
[Sharon Tong](#)

Because you were in the chair, you felt that it was your responsibility to make sure that the Foreign Minister...

00:25:48
[George Yeo](#)

We had to be unified, had to coordinate... I'm sure if some other ASEAN leader were in the chair, they might have accorded Myanmar with the same courtesy.

00:25:55
[Sharon Tong](#)

Let's just talk about ASEAN since we are still talking about that. It's celebrating its 50th. I have read someone write about how despite the challenges in the region, some of the uncertainties, some of the strife that has happened within the region, ASEAN is still the world's rising star. So I'd like to find out to what extent you would actually agree with that statement.

00:26:26

[George Yeo](#)

No, we shouldn't be too self-congratulatory. We have many observers expressing their impatience with ASEAN's elliptical ways that we spend a lot of time arguing, debating, and sometimes when we can't solve a problem, we never resolve it by voting. Then we say, let's form an Eminent Persons Group or let's get an official to discuss it. or let's appoint a task force to give us recommendations. That's how we get around difficulties. It's a little elliptical and it takes time. Naturally people think that we are not so effective like other regional organisations, principally the EU. But that is part of our way of accommodating divergent views and giving due time to adjust their position. Then eventually we take a half step forward and maybe after that we take a quarter step backwards again or sideways. If you look at ASEAN, in a five-year time frame, we have made enormous progress. Year by year, it is arguable whether we are always making progress. But over five years, over ten years, certainly over fifty years, we have made huge, huge progress. That's because we are realistic, and we are non-forcing, we are more fluid in the way we move forward. When I was the Trade Minister, I had on my desk the Treaty of Rome, which established European Common Market - eighty pages, very well written, inspiring document. I dipped into it from time to time for inspiration about ASEAN. After that the common market became the EEC, EC, then EU. It became more and more complicated until today. We have the communiqué, which is a room full of documents, and even if you have a PhD, you won't understand all of it. The institutions are no longer comprehensible. Therefore, they have lost the affection of ordinary Europeans. ASEAN must never be like that. We should keep it simple, and easy for people to understand. So that people can relate to its structures. If you try to do too much, it will become distant, and it will no longer be enduring.

00:28:36

[Sharon Tong](#)

What do you think in the last fifty years were some of ASEAN's biggest challenges?

00:28:40

[George Yeo](#)

We kept the peace. We opened up our internal borders. It created a greater sense of being Southeast Asia. In International forums today in a room full of delegates from all over the world, you'll always find ASEAN delegates gravitating towards one another. In the evenings when they go out for dinner, they always end up meeting each other by chance in the same restaurants.

00:29:05

[Sharon Tong](#)

But I'm talking about challenges and the problems that you felt were the biggest for the region in the last fifty years.

00:29:11

[George Yeo](#)

We maintain a position by constant re-balancing. China is emerging, and they are becoming more important. The US has pivoted to Asia, their new ambitions, their problems. The position is maintained by continuous rebalancing. It is not static. If we take a static position, we will fall. It is like on the trampoline, you are adjusting all the time. Then you are stable. If you say, "No, I am staying put", then you have collapsed.

00:29:45

[Sharon Tong](#)

It is this constant change that you feel keeps ASEAN successful. But the thing is, the last fifty years, and the next fifty years, the contexts are going to be different. The problems are going to be different. Things are changing so rapidly. New issues are emerging constantly. Do you think ASEAN can continue this trajectory of success over the next fifty years?

00:30:12

[George Yeo](#)

Not only continue this trajectory. ASEAN is a necessity, and ASEAN will play a very huge role in creating the new Asia. The big plates, China, India, Japan, the US, they are hard, thick, rigid plates. They move enormous forces. They all move into Southeast Asia. We are like a buffer, we are soft, like a joint in the building, where the forces meet. Because we are able to flex, therefore we allow them to meet harmoniously. You take away this buffer, the whole thing will crash into each other. An ASEAN that loses its wisdom, that loses its internal flexibility, that takes sides, that is no longer neutral will invite all the major powers to fight over Southeast Asia, and it will lead to disaster for the whole of Asia. It is because of this recognition that all the major powers want an ASEAN to be balanced, neutral and fair to everybody. They all want to be here. Then they all say, "Look, ASEAN is in the driver's seat, because we don't trust all the others to be in the driver's seat." ASEAN is a challenge, ASEAN is an absolute necessity.

00:31:26

[Sharon Tong](#)

What about some of the crucial lessons that you feel we can actually take away from the last fifty years?

00:31:37

[George Yeo](#)

Don't, by all means, influence each other. Put pressure on each other, but don't interfere. Accept that each country is different with its own history and its own necessities. Brunei is almost an absolute monarchy. The Philippines has an American influence, democracy. Vietnam and Laos are communists. Cambodia went through hell and is now looking promising again. Thailand will always need the army. So, we just accept people for what they are, and not think that we can reform them in our own image. In fact, even if we

spend our whole life time, we'll not understand enough every one of your neighbours. So be respectful, listen and be humble. Then we can be together.

00:32:29

[Sharon Tong](#)

Yes, it is precisely this diversity, that makes the region unique. But do you see, under any circumstances, this non-interfering stance being tested? Would you have, under any circumstances, because you keep going back to this whole policy of non-interference, how you don't interfere in domestic affairs of your member nations, that you feel this policy can be, or should be changed?

00:33:18

[George Yeo](#)

We talked about Myanmar, which is the most difficult case, earlier you alluded to the haze, and how when forests burn in Indonesia, we get the haze. But it is important that we don't give our neighbours the impression that we are only concerned for ourselves. It is as if your neighbour's house is burning, people are screaming for help, and you are complaining only about the smoke that has entered your compound. It looks as if you are only interested in yourself and very selfish. Our first concern must be for the fact that our neighbour's house is on fire and see what we can do to help put out the fire. Then of course, by doing that we also help ourselves. But it cannot be that our discomforts become the principal driver of our foreign policy.

00:33:56

[Sharon Tong](#)

Ok, thank you.