

Two law dons appointed as senior counsel

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THINK "senior counsel", and what leaps to mind is an aggressive, prominent legal hawk who engages in skilful thrust and parry for a big, fat fee.

The latest additions don't quite fit that image though. Both bespectacled genteel-looking academics oozing erudition, Associate Professor Tan Cheng Han, 39, and Professor Andrew Phang, 46, were appointed yesterday.

Prof Tan is dean of the law faculty at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Prof Phang, who chairs the law department in the Singapore Management University (SMU) is as well known for his modesty as for his textbook on contract law here.

There are 39 senior counsel, but they are the first academics to receive that distinction since the scheme started in 1997.

In fact, Prof Phang did not apply for it. Asked why, he said simply: "I didn't think I'd get it."

Senior Counsel Davinder Singh, his former classmate, said with a laugh: "He was always at the top of the class. Everyone will surround him to get his views on the subject of the day. He'd say he's not so sure... but what comes out of his mouth is so extraordinary."

Prof Phang was chosen for his "international standing", said Singapore Academy of Law director Serene Wee. The only successful application this year was Prof Tan's; 11 others were rejected.

Both professors pronounced themselves "honoured". Said Prof Phang, whose list of publications is as long as a lawyer's case list: "It emphasises the close relationship between practice and academia."

Such appointments are usually seen as a benchmark of a litigator's prowess. So what use would they be to an academic?

Prof Tan, the youngest law dean in Singapore when he was appointed at 36, said: "It's more likely to help my career as a practising lawyer when I step down as dean."

Former students remember both men with affection. "Prof Tan was a very good lecturer," said legal officer Chong Kim Soon, 31. "He was crystal clear, thorough and very good-natured."

Prof Phang taught at NUS for 18 years before leaving in 2000 to join SMU. Prof Tan, who was then vice-dean, took over as NUS law dean a year later. As heads of the law schools of separate universities, it seems logical to assume they are rivals.

That was quickly dealt with by both dons.

Said Prof Tan: "Andrew is an academic I've always admired. He's a personal friend, and I still regard him as one of us. I've been inviting him to come back." Prof Phang added: "Singapore is too small, there is no critical mass of talent. We need our best people to collaborate. We face competition from top law schools elsewhere, and if we're not united, it's counterproductive."

Case closed.



THERE'S NO RIVALRY between SMU's Prof Phang (left) and NUS' Prof Tan, who were appointed yesterday.

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