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# Biographical Profile: Timothy Ong

Chang Yau HOON, *Singapore Management University*

**Southeast  
Asian  
Personalities  
of  
Chinese  
Descent**

**A Biographical  
Dictionary**

Volume I

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him the title of Tan Sri Datuk, and giving him the first National Science Award. He sits on several boards and committees, especially those for higher education and those related to the science and technology of palm oil.

He has also been active in scientific non-government organizations. He founded the Malaysian Invention and Design society (MINDS), The Malaysian Oil Scientists' and Technologists' Association (MOSTA), and the Malaysian Senior Scientists' Association (MSSA). Furthermore, he has nurtured the Confederation of Scientific and Technological Associations in Malaysia (COSTAM) and initiated a number of scientific activities, the main ones being:

- The Malaysian Science and Technology Congress (MSTC) where research scientists and technologists are encouraged to present their results annually.
- The International, Invention, Innovation, and Technology Exhibition (ITEX), an annual event for inventors.
- *The Journal of Science and Technology in the Tropics* (JOSTT) which focuses on research related to problems of the Tropics.

For his contribution to the above activities, he was recognized as follows:

- Winning the TWNSO Prize on Public Understanding of Science 1990, an award given for his role in promoting public interest in innovations and inventions.
- Presented with the Honorary Medal and Certificate from the Cosmonautics Federation of Russia.
- Receiving the IFIA Grand Gold Medal & Certificate for his Altruistic Promotion of Inventors from the president of the International Federation of Inventors' Associations.

- Getting the Senior Citizens Golden Years' Award 2007.

He is married to Lily Leong Lai Han and they have two sons and two daughters. Their eldest son is Reader in Nephrology at the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom, and his youngest daughter is with the Victoria Hospital at the Queens University of Belfast, as head of medical bacteriology. His two other children are in the corporate world.

*Tan Chong Tin*

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## Ong Teck Mong, Timothy

(王德望, Wang Dewang, 1953–)

*Businessman, regional figure, Brunei*

**D**ato Paduka Timothy Ong Teck Mong is a third-generation member of a leading Brunei Chinese family from Fujian province whose origins in Brunei date from the beginning of the last century. Ong is the eldest son of Dato Paduka Ong Kim Kee (1931–98) and the grandson of Pehin Kapitan Ong Boon Pang (1882–1940), both Brunei business and community leaders in their time. His maternal grandfather, Dato Paduka Kong En Choi, was considered the most senior ethnic Chinese civil servant in colonial Brunei.

Dato Ong was born in November 1953 in what was then Brunei Town (Bandar Seri

Begawan today) and received his primary and most of his secondary education at an English-medium missionary school, St Andrew's. In stark contrast to Ong's father and grandfather's rootedness in Chinese education, Ong and his siblings were all English educated. This was attributable to the influence of his English-speaking mother, Doris Kong Suik Yin, in the formative years of his life.

At St Andrew's School, Ong was the top student every year right through to his final year. In 1970, when he was sixteen years old, his parents sent him to one of Australia's most prestigious schools, Geelong Grammar School, to complete his education. In his final year, he was awarded School Colours for academic achievement, and the ANZ Bank Prize for being the top student in economics.

From Geelong Grammar School Ong went to the Australian National University (ANU) where he began studying law and economics and then switched to political science, graduating with a B.A. (Hons) in 1976. At the ANU, he spent most of his time on student politics and was a student activist. In his second year at university, he was elected a co-national director of the Overseas Student Service, a body representing all foreign students studying in Australia.

In 1977 Ong returned to Brunei to help his father manage Chop Teck Guan, the family-owned conglomerate. His father was in poor health at the time. His first business initiative was to build the Sheraton Hotel, Brunei's first international hotel. After the successful completion of the hotel in 1981, he took a year off to study in the United Kingdom at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where he obtained a Master of Science degree with distinction in International Relations in 1982.

Ong has often described himself as a "reluctant entrepreneur" whose first love was politics. In fact, his initial entry into business was mainly motivated by filial loyalty. In a speech to a business conference in 1995 he acknowledged that, "Throughout the world but especially in the Confucian cultures, family loyalty and its associated values constitute a significant recruiting agent for the entrepreneurial class."

Despite his initial reluctance, Ong eventually took to business and is today regarded as one of Brunei's leading businessmen. He has built a number of leading businesses outside of the family business, including National Insurance — Brunei's largest general insurance company. He is also a board member of a number of leading local and regional bodies, including Baiduri Bank, Prudential Asia's Advisory Board, and the Asian Institute of Management.

In 2000 Ong bought an ailing regional business publication — *Asia Inc* magazine — that had been started by the Thai Chinese media magnate, Sondhi Limthongkul, with the aim of turning it around and making it a leading Asian publication. He was, however, unsuccessful in his efforts and publication of the magazine ceased in 2008. Nevertheless, the magazine's conferencing arm, Asia Inc Forum, has become a regional leader in convening and organizing high-level business meetings. Of business failure, Ong frequently says, "Failure can be a great teacher. Success does not lie in never failing but in rising every time you fall."

In the mid-1990s, Ong became a leading figure in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC). He was appointed by the Brunei Government to represent Brunei in the APEC Eminent Persons Group (1994–96) which developed the APEC vision of Open Regionalism. He was also chairman of the APEC Business Advisory Board when



Brunei hosted the APEC Summit in 2000 and has frequently been invited to speak at various international conferences and forums, including the World Economic Forum, the APEC CEO Summit, and the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council.

Since 2000, he has been invited to advise the annual APEC CEO Summit which brings together government and business leaders from across the Asia Pacific. In recognition of Ong's contribution to regionalism, the Government of Chile bestowed him Chile's highest civilian award, The Grand Cross of the Order of Bernardo O'Higgins.

In 2005, Ong was appointed by the Sultan of Brunei to act as chairman of the Brunei Economic Development Board (BEDB), reporting to Prince Mohamed Bolkiah, the Sultan's brother and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This appointment was a rare honour for a Brunei citizen of Chinese descent.

Under Ong's leadership, the BEDB undertook a number of trail-blazing initiatives, including developing Brunei's first petrochemical industry, pioneering large-scale social housing for Brunei citizens, and creating Brunei's first technology incubator. His appointment as BEDB chairman ended in 2010, following a reorganization in government which saw the BEDB being transferred to the Prime Minister's Office.

Ong was conferred the title of *Dato Paduka* by the Sultan of Brunei in 2006 in recognition of his public service. As a Brunei Chinese who has achieved considerable success, he is thankful for the opportunities that Brunei has presented him and is committed to an open, successful, and inclusive Brunei.

Like his forebears, Ong has pursued a business career while seeking to contribute to society. Also, reflecting the transformations within the Asia Pacific and the growing

interconnectedness of the region, he has made his mark regionally, beyond the shores of Brunei. Ong is a Christian and has two sons and a daughter.

*Hoon Chang Yau*

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The information for this entry was obtained by the author through email and phone interviews with Dato Paduka Timothy Ong in April and May 2012.

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## Ong Teng Cheong

(王鼎昌, Wang Dingchang, 1936–2005)

*Architect, civil servant, politician, Singapore*

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Ong Teng Cheong, who was born in 1936 in Singapore, is most well known for being Singapore's first directly elected president. Although the presidency in Singapore was then largely a ceremonial position, Ong exerted his own personal touch during his tenure as nominal head of state, and had, at times, spoken out against the prime minister. Under the amended Constitution of Singapore of January 1991, he had power to veto appointments in the civil service and the use of government reserves, veto the government's budget and appointments to public office, examine the administration's enforcement of the Internal Security Act and religious harmony laws, and look into

investigations of corruption. He sometimes went beyond the powers stipulated for his office as laid out in the amended Constitution. The first instance of this occurred in 1993 when he had a dispute with the government over access of information regarding Singapore's financial reserves.

In that incident, Ong displayed a great deal of courage in calling for government transparency and accountability in the way in which it spent Singapore's financial reserves. He was, in fact, instrumental to prompting this type of public accountability in the publication of the *White Paper on the Determination and Safeguarding of the Protection of the Reserves of the Government*. While the government of the time may have felt that Ong was unreasonable for demanding access to Singapore's financial reserves information, the incident and the resultant White Paper demonstrates his firm dedication to his duties as president. In fact, this "clash" between Ong and the government proved the observers of the presidential election wrong when they had earlier speculated that Ong, as former chairman of the People's Action Party (PAP), secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress, and PAP Member of Parliament, would continue to remain a PAP loyalist and stay in line with the government's plans. The fracas over access of information regarding Singapore's financial reserves demonstrated that he was his own man who wanted to do his best by the citizens, rather than a man staunchly loyal to the ways of the ruling party. Despite numerous government attempts to delay the financial reports, Ong finally received them and the White Paper was published. His adamant stand in calling for an audit of all the properties that the government owns and information about the reserves clearly shows that he felt the expenditure of these reserves ought to benefit the people, and that there

ought to be some form of transparency as to the government spending of these reserves.

An inkling of this aspect of his character may be gleaned from an incident that occurred in January 1986 when he was still secretary general of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). Instead of quelling a strike in the shipping industry and informing the cabinet or the government as leaders of the ruling party felt he should have done, Ong sanctioned the strike. It was the first strike in over ten years and the government was taken aback when it occurred. Despite the corporate and cabinet backlash against his decision, Ong firmly stuck by his decision, claiming that the cabinet or the government would have stopped him from going ahead with the strike. The shipping strike in 1986 clearly marks Ong as a man who is determined to put his commitment to public interest over his loyalty to the ruling party.

Despite his coming to points with the government, it was his penchant for serving the public that brought him to the attention of the Lee Kuan Yew government. As a resident of Seletar Hills in the 1960s, he took a keen interest in grassroots activities and constantly involved himself with bettering the lives of the people, using his training in architecture for the residents' benefits. This soon led to his appointment as chairman of the Residents' Association. This appointment and his personable nature towards ordinary citizens brought him to the notice of then Member of Parliament for Jalan Kayu, Hwang Soo Jin. In turn, Hwang introduced Ong to then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who wasted no time in fielding Ong as a PAP candidate in the 1972 general election in the Kim Keat constituency, which he won and held until the 1991 elections. Despite the requests of several senior government officials that he take up full ministerial duties on top of his responsibilities as a Member of Parliament, Ong declined because

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