

ALUMNI SCENE

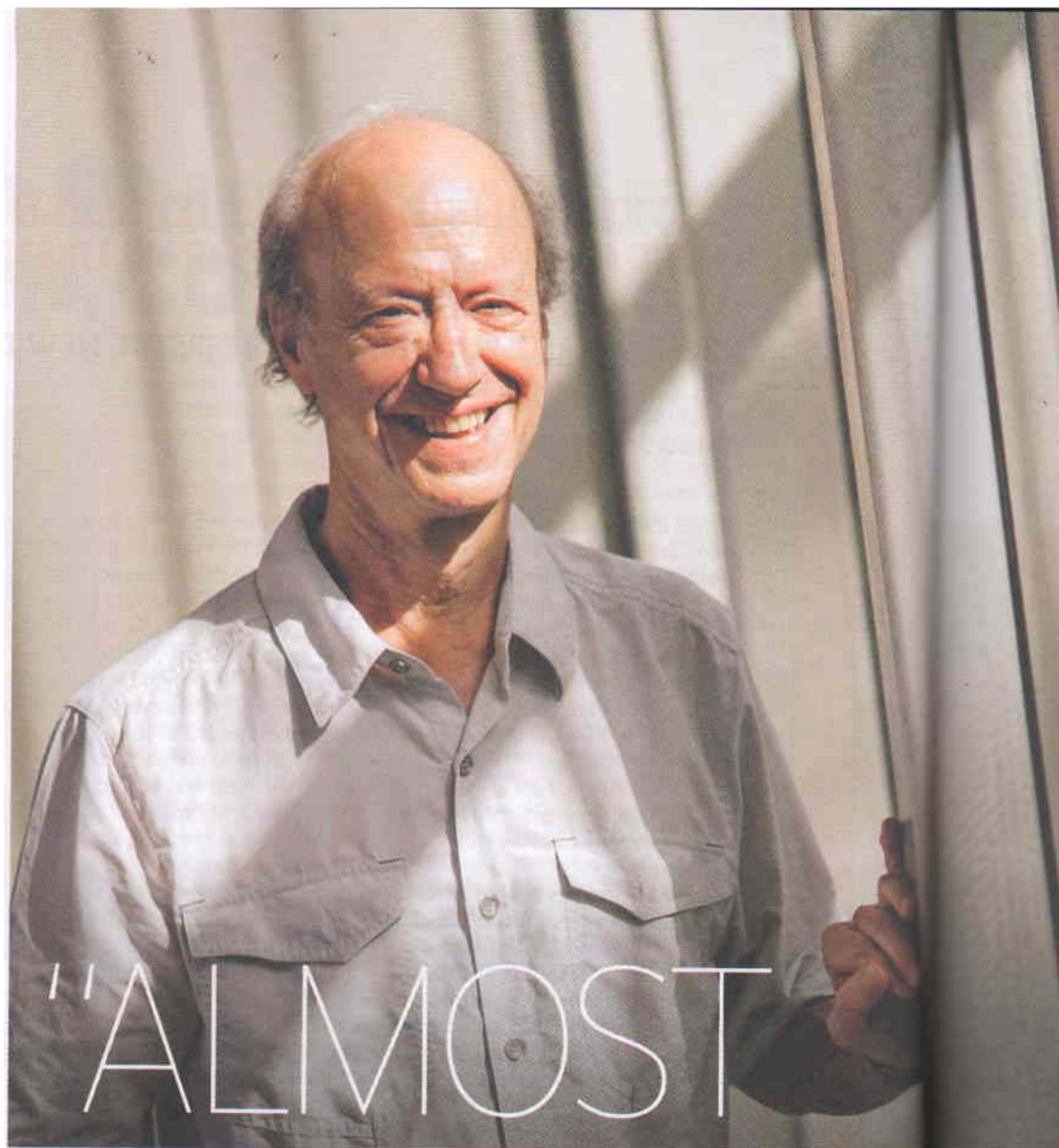


HEN RODOLPHE DE KONINCK did

his Master of Arts studies at the Université Laval in Québec in the mid-60s, he became interested in Southeast Asian issues, in particular those pertaining to agriculture. Prompted by his professors, he decided to pursue his studies in this area, but in a manner that was not the norm at the time.

"I did not look kindly on the fundamentally colonial relationship which characterised the system, whereby Western PhD students did fieldwork in developing countries but completed their degrees in their home countries," the 70-year-old Canadian tells *AlumNUS*.

"So I enquired about universities in Southeast Asia and was told that the best in the region was the University of Singapore. So I wrote up a research project about plantations in the state of Johor and applied both to the University and to the Canada Council for a scholarship.



SINGAPOREAN"

I was lucky with both applications and, as soon as I had publicly defended my MA thesis, I headed for Singapore. I made several stopovers in Europe, the Middle East and India, taking six weeks to reach Singapore on 26 May 1967. I was to remain for three years, almost to the day."

Although he had proposed a thesis on the state of Johor, Prof de Koninck found difficulty in getting a Malaysian research permit while being based in a Singaporean university. "So, I followed the advice to focus on what I still think was a wise choice: Singapore's own farming areas and populations.

FOR PROFESSOR RODOLPHE DE KONINCK, THE THEN-UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE'S FIRST PHD STUDENT IN 1967, SINGAPORE IS A FAMILY AFFAIR. BY THERESA TAN

I should perhaps remind you that by the late 1960s, more than 20 per cent of Singapore's territory were still devoted to farming, mostly market gardening, pig and poultry rearing. The so-called City State was then nearly self-sufficient in vegetables, its rural belt also supplying some 50 per cent of the local demand for pork and chicken."

His thesis was subsequently

published under the title of *Farmers of a City-State. The Chinese Smallholders of Singapore*.

Prof de Koninck completed his thesis and returned to Québec in 1970, but his fondness for Singapore saw him return with his family, as a Visiting Professor to the Asian Research Institute in 1997. To date, he has written four books on Singapore.

He traces his love affair with



Singapore back to his days as an undergraduate in the University of Bordeaux, France, a top university in the 1960s. "I had followed some solid courses in what was then called Tropical Geography, including an excellent one focussed on Indonesia and the newly-minted Malaysia, which, let us not forget, then included Singapore (1963-65). That got me hooked," he explains.

Also as a teenager, he was already reading novels about Africa and Asia, and its Southeastern component in particular.

The geographer, who has been the Canada Chair of Asia Research at the University of Montreal since 2002, arrived in Singapore two years after its independence. He was just 24. "Singapore struck me as a wonderful place, full of life and possibilities. Problems of poverty, housing, urban and land management, etc were prevalent, but things were being done about them. I also struck it off with Singaporeans, local residents as well as committed expats, making several friends, many having to this day remained so!"

An adventurer at heart, Prof de Koninck explored his tropical surrounds – and cuisine – with gusto. "Life on the Bukit Timah campus itself was rather quiet, but pleasant nevertheless. I first stayed for a couple of months in Dunearn Hostels, just across from the campus. The place

was conveniently located and reasonably comfortable, but the food was lousy, giving a wrong impression of the great gastronomic adventures available in Singapore!

So I quickly stopped taking my meals there, venturing out to eat at various street hawker stalls, making numerous discoveries, including that of durians, to which I eventually became addicted, as should be!" he recalls.

Among his favourite memories of 1960s Singapore is scuba diving in the "then still relatively clean waters off the coast of Pasir Panjang and the Southern Islands". He also joined the Hash House Harriers for "their weekly joyful evening jogs" when he was writing his thesis.

Prof de Koninck made many

now "not that hard". "I did face some difficulties, for example, showing a lot of patience – not my speciality – with a number of Chinese farmers definitely not interested in revealing much about their farming operations, but I did learn to cope!" he says.

He enlisted the help of his new friends for his thesis. "Some graduate and undergraduate student friends, predominantly from the Geography and Political Science departments, helped as interviewers for the surveys I carried among Chinese farmers in all of the peripheral and rural areas of the island: Jurong, Chua Chu Kang, Lim Chu Kang, Mandai, Punggol, etc," he remembers. "One of the best was Patrick Low, still a good

friend. I drove to these areas on a regular basis, either on my vintage BSA 500 motorbike, acquired for a reasonable price at the Sungei Road Thieves Market, or when I needed to be accompanied by interpreters, in cars borrowed from one or the other of my friends on campus."

Prof de Koninck has returned to Singapore almost every year since he completed his PhD thesis in 1970. The island is a passion he shares with his wife and

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friends during his stay, many of them teaching staff at the University: former ambassador Chan Heng Chee and David Gibbons (now based in Malaysia), from the Political Science department, and Peter Weldon (now based in Thailand) from Sociology. His fellow graduate students included Professor Wong Poh Poh in the Geography Department who only retired recently. Beyond the University, Prof de Koninck names Willy Lim, Lena Lim and Tay Kheng Soon as "three enduring friends" from the Singapore Urban and Planning Research Group (SPUR).

Completing his PhD thesis came with its fair share of challenges, though Prof de Koninck considers it

his only daughter. "In June 1968, I made a quick trip back to Québec, to marry Hélène Legendre," he says. "We returned together to Singapore, where she completed her MA in Urban Geography, subsequently obtaining her own PhD in Paris, at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Our daughter also studied at NUS! In 1997, she accompanied us to Singapore – Hélène was then a Visiting Researcher at ISEAS – and enrolled at the NUS Chinese Language Proficiency Centre. She enjoyed it so much and did so well that she stayed for an additional year, coming out with a solid grasp of Mandarin, which she eventually perfected in Beijing. So, as you see, Singapore is very much a family affair." ■