The time is NOW – Apply to be a National Research Foundation Fellow

Meet two academics with different research interests and from diverse backgrounds. Both are here in Singapore doing ground-breaking research as National Research Foundation (NRF) Fellows.

Assistant Professor Joseph Fitzsimons
Quantum Theory & Information, Engineering Product Development, Singapore University of Technology and Design

From one of the oldest universities in the world to one of the newest—you could call Prof Joseph Fitzsimons’ move a quantum leap. It is, after all, one of the theoretical physicist’s research interests. It did not, however, require a big leap of faith for him to settle in Singapore, a country he considers “a great place to do science”.

Associate Professor Xiong Qihua
Associate Chair (Research), School of Physical & Mathematical Sciences, Nanyang Technological University

Among his many awards, Prof Xiong Qihua can count being one of the second batch to be awarded Singapore’s National Research Foundation (NRF) Research Fellowship in 2009 as a life changer.

He recalls a “brutal” wait in a hotel room for news after the interview, which would mark a new era for him. Six months later, he was back in Singapore with his wife and 2-year-old son. His second child was born here, and in 2014, Prof Xiong took up citizenship.

To read more about Prof Fitzsimons and Prof Xiong, click the link below http://www.contactsingapore.sg/eCareers/Research/Feb2015/profiles

Singapore National Research Foundation (NRF) Fellowship

The Singapore National Research Foundation (NRF) Fellowship is a globally competitive programme to attract and root young scientists and researchers to conduct independent research in Singapore. It is open to areas of science and technology. Outstanding young scientists and researchers of all nationalities are welcome to apply.

Each Fellow is provided with a research grant over five years, to support projects that exhibit high likelihood of a research breakthrough. This grant supports a research team comprising at least one post-doctoral fellow and two PhD students, costs of incremental research facilities and consumables.

NRF invites applications once a year, and taps on local research organisations and contacts to identify potential candidates.

There is a two-step selection process, comprising a shortlisting process and a final selection. Shortlisted candidates will be invited to Singapore for a final interview by the NRF Fellowship Evaluation Panel.)

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- Development Scientist / Development Engineer - Machining Processes
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- Full/ Associate/ Assistant Professor
- School of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering Tenured Full Professor/ Tenure-Track Associate and Assistant Professor
- Clinician Scientist
Appointees will be offered tenure-track faculty positions at any of the Singapore-based universities and research institutions. This includes the five Research Centres of Excellence or RCEs hosted at our universities. (Visit http://www.nrf.gov.sg/media-resources/publications/nrf-corporate-factsheets to download the factsheet on RCEs.)

Applications must be submitted online at https://rita.nrf.gov.sg/default.aspx before 25 February 2015, 3pm.

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ABOUT SINGAPORE
In the heart of Asia lies Singapore - a bustling, world-class city state that has made waves around the world for its business excellence, connectivity to the world and its innovation.

Singapore has been consistently acknowledged as a global business hub - one that features developed infrastructure, political stability, open business policies, a skilled workforce, the use of English as the main working language and respect for intellectual property rights. Many multinational companies have chosen to set up their bases in Singapore, next to 154,000 small and medium enterprises. Business owners all over the world regard Singapore as an ideal location to grow their businesses, with many of them using the country as a springboard to tap into other emerging markets in Asia.

Besides being ranked in the World Bank 2013 Report as the world’s easiest place to do business (out of 185 countries), Singapore has, among its many accolades, the top ranking in the Global Competitiveness Report 2013-2014 by the World Economic Forum as being the most competitive economy in Asia. Singapore was also ranked by the Mercer 2012 Quality of Living Survey as the top Asian country for its quality of life.

Global talent are attracted to Singapore’s meritocratic society that embraces diversity, and a high quality of life in a cosmopolitan environment.

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"I had previously been to Singapore on several occasions to visit the Centre for Quantum Technologies (CQT)," Prof Fitzsimons explains. The CQT, Singapore's first Research Centre for Excellence, is well known for its exploration of information technologies using quantum mechanics. That, and the high standard of living he noted here, prompted him to apply for a position. Upon receiving a senior research fellowship at CQT, Prof Fitzsimons flew down from the UK, joined shortly afterwards by his new wife who moved over from Dublin.

Exciting times

Just two years on, in 2013, Prof Fitzsimons was awarded a National Research Foundation (NRF) Fellowship worth up to S$3 million (US$2.4 million), and took up a tenure as Assistant Professor at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD).

Having previously spent five years at the renowned, centuries-old University of Oxford, becoming a pioneer of Singapore's latest university presented the young researcher new opportunities.

"I was very impressed and excited by the clear vision and ambition they had to grow this new university into a leading institution," Prof Fitzsimons enthuses. Pointing to the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University as his source of confidence, he says, "That they already place very highly on most university rankings shows Singapore clearly has experience producing world-class universities."

He expounds, "As a pioneer at SUTD you get to blaze a new trail, rather than be trying to fill the shoes of a predecessor. This makes it a very exciting place to work. Most of the faculty are young and very enthusiastic, and eager to collaborate, which gives the campus quite a buzz.

"One thing that can certainly be said is that life at SUTD is never dull!"

Competitive opportunities

On the research sector in Singapore, Prof Fitzsimons is equally warm. "There is very good support in terms of funding and opportunities for junior faculty, from the NRF and Ministry of Education, as well as from the universities themselves," he points out. While noting that not all areas of science are fully represented in the country, he perceives that "Singapore is rising rapidly in both reputation and opportunities. From my perspective, Singapore has been extremely competitive."

Receiving the NRF Fellowship was a boost for the professor. "It made a huge difference," he declares. "My group has grown substantially, and we are making far more progress together than I think any of us would have made alone. The fellowship gives you the time and resources to tackle a really big problem, something that you could never consider tackling on your own."

He also cites having the CQT at his doorstep as a great advantage. "Not only are there a number of extremely successful groups based there, but there is a constant stream of high-profile visitors, workshops and conferences," he observes. He still holds a joint appointment at the centre.

Life beyond the lab

When he is not engrossed in his research or busy helping develop the new university, the 32-year-old and his China-born wife find time to get to know the city better. Both keen photographers, they have uncovered some of the quieter spots around, which Prof Fitzsimons says "give the city more character". He remarks, "Singapore offers a huge variety of interesting locations.

"Certainly, my impressions have changed over the years, but then so has Singapore," he reflects. "There is constant development!"

Coming to Singapore had been a smooth transition for the couple. The Dubliner points out, "The cultural diversity in Singapore makes it easy for both of us to live here without at least one of us feeling like an outsider."

Not least, they have made a conscious effort to connect with the local food culture. Prof Fitzsimons shares, "When we first came, we initially found ourselves going back to the same few places, but now we enjoy exploring Singapore's astonishing range of restaurants.

"I think what I most like is the buzz of the city," Prof Fitzsimons affirms. "I have always been a city person, and in Singapore there is always something happening, somewhere to go."

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He recalls a "brutal" wait in a hotel room for news after the interview, which would mark a new era for him. Six months later, he was back in Singapore with his wife and 2-year-old son. His second child was born here, and in 2014, Prof Xiong took up citizenship.

Building a career

Previously based in the United States for ten years, the Hubei native had never been to Singapore. However, settling in was never a problem.
"Singapore's systems are very transparent," he believes. "People are willing to help. It's a place where you can get things done easily with good communication."

As a case in point, Prof Xiong describes how building up his laboratory in Nanyang Technological University (NTU) took only six months to complete—half the time it might have taken anywhere else.

That the 41-year-old chose NTU as his base was partly because the faculty had only just set up. The pioneering spirit that leads his research also enjoys being part of something new. Prof Xiong recounts how NTU is "doing fantastic," being counted among the top international universities, and gaining a global reputation in such a short time. That the quality of research here is high is reflected in the Index of Global Impact, he points out. "I can feel that I have contributed to this success," he beams.

Growing new roots

While it was an easy decision taking up permanent residency, taking the step towards citizenship required much thought, because his wife's and his parents are still in China.

However, it was his elder son who nudged him towards the citizenship. Having grown up here, the primary school student knows Singapore as home. Furthermore, Prof Xiong's wife, who quit her research post in San Diego when they had their son, is glad to be back in research again, at the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School Singapore. Being able to employ a helper here to take care of the children has helped, and Singapore's proximity to China means the grandparents can easily visit.

Prof Xiong's career was blooming, with his tenure recently granted and promoted to Associate Professor. It was also "so timely", he says, when he won his second NRF award, the NRF Investigatorship. The award, he feels, promotes more sustainable research and is a chance for him "to develop into a world-leading scientist".

A bright future for research

Indeed, he believes that he has made the right choice building his career in Singapore. "The research grant and support is enormous," he tells us. "The offers I received in the US cannot compare."

He quips, "If I had stayed in the US, the only advantage I'd have would be living in a bigger house!"

When his previous supervisor visited him in Singapore, he told Prof Xiong, "I'm proud of what you've done here."

Still, working in Singapore has its challenges. Prof Xiong shares, "Prospective students still think of the UK, Europe, US as their first choice. It makes it difficult to attract high quality PhD students." His own lab is staffed by students from China, India, the US, Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore. He has trained many local students, he says, but the top ones still tend to want to leave for those countries.

Fortunately, Prof Xiong says, both the government and the universities are doing what they can to send a different message to these students. With strong international collaborations, attractive scholarships, good pay and other perks, "the opportunities here are comparable with top universities worldwide," he asserts.

In his years here, Prof Xiong has already seen several changes in the research scene, which he feels are good for the sector. Notably, this includes an increase in total funding. "The percentage of investment in research here is enormous compared to other countries," he says. He also notes ample opportunities for those with niche interests.

Looking forward, he hopes to see more interest in single Principle Investigator (PI) projects, which he feels can lead to major scientific breakthroughs.

A good life

Asked what he likes about being here, Prof Xiong cites the diversity of cultures and food, and the cleanliness. When he first came, Prof Xiong expected to see a congested urban landscape but was surprised to find Singapore so green. He now stays at Bukit Panjang, a district just next to Singapore's central reservoirs and nature reserves. With his two kids, Prof Xiong finds time to enjoy life, bringing them to the zoo and other parks.

"Best of all," he jokes, "it's so easy to dress! With the tropical climate, I just need to throw on shirt and trousers every day.

"Life here is pretty good," he smiles. "My family is happy here."