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Institutions and Economic Development: Cheong Kee Cheok's Contribution to Economic Thought

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Abstract: This paper seeks to review the theories and arguments of two leading economic schools that Cheong Kee Cheok dabbled on, initially originating with neo-classical economic thinking to gradually appreciate evolutional economic thinking. In doing so, the paper makes it clear that logic, merit and evidence drove much of Cheong Kee Cheok's economic thinking, including acknowledging that within the context of the real world where markets (relative prices) often lacked its allocative role when faced with complicated and often opaque circumstances. However, his analyses stayed clear of illogical arguments predicated on the politics of the majority and the politics of the powerful to be transcendental and humanistic in nature. With these credentials as the central pillars of his character, Cheong Kee Cheok gained popularity as an unbiased universal scholar who exchanged ideas freely with people of all walks of life, including with the countless students he mentored.

Keywords: Development economics, neoclassical theorising, evolutionary theorising, institutions
JEL classification: B1, B15, DO2, EO2, O43

1. Introduction

While the debate on the drivers of economic development remains without consensus with Friedman (1962)[1] and Hayek (1944) emphasising the importance of economic agents freely defining the role of markets and Galbraith (1952), Keynes (1936) and Tobin (1980) underlining the nature of imperfect markets that make the role of government important. Whereas Friedman and Hayek referred to governments as the scourge of economic wellbeing of business and societies, Galbraith, Keynes and Tobin argued that governments have a role to play in the economic well-being of industries and people. These economic heavyweights did not directly emphasise the role and importance of

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[1] Because agents' expectations about the future are obviously important for many of their current decisions, Lucas (1972) argued that the development of the economy is to a considerable degree affected by current expectations about future developments.

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institutions in general but subsequent developments attracted the modelling of imperfect markets and scale economies (e.g., Grossman, 1992; Helpman & Krugman, 1985).

Veblen (1915) was arguably the earliest to explain the role of institutions in economic development when discussing institutions and institutional change in the development of Germany. While Schumpeter (1934, 1939, 1942) had begun explaining the important role of technology and technical change in driving economic progress, Veblen (1915) articulated the critical role of institutions in shaping the conduct of individuals, firms and organisations in widening and deepening innovations to support economic development. Institutions are defined as the instruments and influences that shape and mould the conduct of individuals, firms and organisations (North, 1993). Organisations, or specifically intermediary organisations, perform the function of solving collective action problems. Whereas evolutionary economists argue that at all times a blend of institutions influence the conduct of individuals and organisations (Nelson & Winter, 1982), the new institutional economists emphasise that the market is the superior institution and it defines the space for other complimentary institutions, such as government instruments, and trust and loyalty to solve market failures (Coase, 1937, 1992; North, 1993; Williamson, 1981).

While the early use of institutions focused on institutional change that drove economic development of the now developed countries, institutions have again emerged as a powerful shaper of economic progress and structural change (Nelson, 2008; Rasiah, 2011; Zhang & Rasiah, 2015). The contrast between the new evolutionary and institutional economists have remained with contrasting postulations that retain the divide between them. For example, Amsden (1989, 1991), Johnson (1982) and Wade (1990) examined South Korea, Japan and Taiwan to present them as cases where the augmenting role of the state in governing markets are important to capture the critical role states play to address market failures. Meanwhile, the World Bank (1993), acknowledged the impactful use of selective state interventions in driving rapid economic growth and structural change in these Northeast Asian countries, but still contended that such interventions are neither possible nor worth the risks for states to pursue in future. Indeed, while the World Bank (1993) promoted the Southeast Asian economies as better examples to chart the export expansion path, Fishlow et al. (1994) disapproved such a position. Rodrik (2004) argued that capital accumulation through the use of imported foreign technology as the driver of rapid growth in South Korea and Taiwan. The latter has been contested by evolutionary economists who argue that innovation starts from simple adaptive activities and the processes of R&D activity is in itself a catch-up experience (see for example Rasiah, 2011). Both Cimoli and Dosi (1995), and Rasiah (1995) emphasise the importance of tacit knowledge in the economic development processes that is often missed in the measurement instruments used to estimate technical change.

2. Contributions on Institutions, States and Markets

Having been exposed to a wide range of literature on economic growth and structural change – both the theories and the empirical experience of East Asian economies – Cheong Kee Cheok began to look at economic development from a broad perspective when examining the experiences of countries, such as China and Malaysia (see Zhang et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021) with a profound focus on unravelling critically the link between policy and the empirical experience. While he was a student of distinction in econometrics, his mastery of economics, the English language and philosophy allowed him to produce well balanced and nuanced arguments backed with evidence to take positions that were free from ideological bias. Instead of focusing on assumptions as given or commandments cast in stone, Cheong Kee Cheok preferred stylised frameworks that allowed him to generate incisive and yet realistic accounts of the economic experiences he researched on (see Cheong & Li, 2023; Cheong & Than, 2022; Cheong & Yong, 2022; Zhang et al., 2019).

Dealing directly on Cheong Kee Cheok's works, a number present critical assessments of education and training in Malaysia, including a highly critical assessment of education policies in Malaysia, which he and his co-authors regard as the drawbacks that have held Malaysia back as centre of educational excellence (see Cheong et al., 2016; Cheong & Selvaratnam, 2019; Cheong, Selvaratnam, & Goh, 2011; Cheong & Yong, 2022). Cheong Kee Cheok took on a middle ground when evaluating corporate performance between privately owned and state-owned enterprises in China.

Given his education in quantitative methodologies, including in econometrics, Cheong Kee Cheok wrote his early works on population and demography where it was widely deployed. He also attracted significant funds to finance research on this topic at Universiti Malaya. For example Cheong and Lim (1982) examined the population and development nexus by focusing on how population growth has impacted economic development and demographic change, and in turn how economic development has impacted population growth and demographic change in Malaysia. A significant update with added emphasis on the different sectors was then published later (Tey et al., 2015).

Cheong Kee Cheok also worked on some serious economic history articles with his colleagues. For example, while acknowledging the truncated way the overseas Chinese settled in Malaysia (which was different from how they were integrated in Indonesia and Thailand), Wong et al. (2018) traced through the Great Depression and subsequent financial crises, economic ties of the Chinese with mainland China to emphasise the resilience and vital role they have played in Malaysia's political economy. Meanwhile, Lee et al. (2013) observed that amidst the lack of longevity among Chinese overseas family businesses, Robert Kuok successfully turned family, dialect and the state to his advantage to become Southeast Asia's richest man to benefit from his Johor Bahru background, the changing domestic political landscape, and shifting regional economic influence. Meanwhile, through examining the case histories of two successful Chinese overseas family firms, Cheong et al. (2015) argued that explanations of internationalisation need often to venture beyond the confines of existing theories, especially where contextual factors are influential in shaping decision-making. The experiences of the Kuok Group founded by Robert Kuok and the Royal Selangor Pewter founded by Yong Koon Seong point to the role of the state as a major contextual factor.

In addition, Cheong Kee Cheok undertook significant research on technical and vocational education training (TVET) with a focus on Malaysia. Cheong et al. (2013), Cheong and Li (2023), and Cheong and Yong (2022) dissect the TVET system in Malaysia to argue that the general administration generally look satisfactory but only superficially as the inadequately articulated purpose and goals, and hence, consequently impacted negatively on the development of the Malaysian technical labour force. The same conclusions are made with Malaysia's human capital development policies (Cheong & Than, 2022).

Cheong Kee Cheok's admirably critical mind is exhibited in Cheong and Goh (2013) where the article throws a spanner at the Nobel Laureate Paul Romer for promoting Hong Kong as a charter city arguing over major departures from the charter city model (Lutter, 2019). Cheong and Goh note that Hong Kong's success is largely derived from its unique geography and bilateral economic relationship with China, contending that a charter city cannot hope to emulate, and that Hong Kong's relationship with its hinterland does not fully fit the expected impact of a charter city on its surrounding areas when it comes to China's special economic zones. Indeed, the rapid expansion of the industrial metropolitan city of Shenzhen is considerably a consequence of foreign industrial investment locating directly high technology firms.

In another paper, Nagaraj et al. (2014) acknowledged the massive gains made by females in tertiary attainment, which have led to greater depth of their participation in the labour market. However, Cheong Kee Cheok's critical lenses in that article can be seen from the several concerns the article raises, arguing that the female advantage in terms of tertiary enrollment did not translate directly into their participation in the labour market as female graduates are more likely than male graduates to be in lower paying jobs or stuck among the unemployed. In this context, Cheong Kee Cheok expended considerable time on reviewing Malaysia's education and training policies. Among his major criticisms of the related policies in Malaysia is the drawbacks the New Economic Policy, politicisation and the ethnic discrimination it generated to produce suboptimal outcomes in both education and training (Cheong & Selvaratnam, 2019, Cheong & Than, 2022; Cheong & Yong, 2022; Cheong and Li, 2023).

A staunch advocate of merit, transparency and performance, Cheong was incisive in his dismantling of government policies that from the outset did not offer any confidence that they showed the mettle to succeed. For example, when discussing the impact of public-private partnerships, Thillainathan and Cheong (2019) criticised the opaqueness behind its implementation in Malaysia, especially the private finance initiatives (PFIs) which have been cloaked in secrecy that inevitably resulted in disastrous rent-seeking exercises. They concluded that these PFI initiatives were designed to benefit vested interests at the expense of taxpayers. As noted earlier, Cheong Kee Cheok always took on an ideologically neutral position, which is seen in Cheong, Duc and Thang (2011) where they call for the state to lead strategic planning to ensure that Vietnam does not fall into the middle-income trap.

Cheong Kee Cheok was scathing when dealing with unproductive rent seeking but stayed clear of ideological posturing. For example, Zhang et al. (2019) argue over the strong arm of the state in the manner with which corporate tax management is governed in China. In their arguments over the interface between markets and the state in governing corporate tax management, they argue that the 'helping hand' of the state can help reduce uncertainty and risks in the early stages of corporations. However, on the flipside, they also argue that complacency and self-interested bureaucrats can turn that strong arm of the state as a grabbing hand. Quite clearly Cheong Kee Cheok was aware of both state and market failures as can be seen in Zhang et al. (2021) where Enron's bailout is presented as a case of powerful interest groups arising from markets grabbing the hand of the state. In doing so, Wang et al. (2018) and Wang et al. (2019) acknowledge the significant role of the government in the historical development of Nanning. Meanwhile, Thillainathan and Cheong (2016) offer evidence to argue over the discriminatory experience of the New Economic Policy in Malaysia, albeit acknowledging that there could be a trade-off between efficiency and stability.[3] In this regard, Sen (1983) discussed the 'carrots and sticks' approach to curb the unproductive and wasteful role of rents by calling for the stringent use of discipline when states offer rents.

In addition, Cheong Kee Cheok worked with his colleagues on how governments connected with organizations in societies to capture inductively the political economy outcomes of such networks. For example, Gomez et al. (2018) employ a state-society distinction to determine how governments in China, India, and Southeast Asia envision development, through state intervention, as well as with the employment of highly entrepreneurial ethnic groups, and the outcomes such networked entrepreneurs bring to their societies and economies. Gomez et al. (2020) subsequently worked on a stylized framework to examine state-state relations and the new forms of state-business relations that have emerged following rising foreign direct investments from China to Malaysia by focusing on investments in the industrial sector using in-depth case studies. The inductive vantage point using cases defined by different modes of state-business negotiations helps them to produce diverse outcomes to reflect the disparate forms of power relationships and state cohesiveness with unique institutional architectures formed in each case.

Hence, this special issue draws on the works by Cheong Kee Cheok's colleagues who were either co-authors to his publications, his graduate students or confidantes who share his views on economic issues. It brings together arguments from both sides of the divide that characterize institutions. However, instead of just focusing on the institutional divide between the new institutionalists and evolutionary economists, the issue takes on an open approach to welcome the different types of approaches still adopted to explain economic development in particular, but the empirically driven experiences of the developing and the least developed economies in particular. I believe this is what Cheong Kee Cheok would have welcomed, i.e. robust articulations and analysis that is partisan to intellectual scholarship rather than dogma. While Cheong Kee Cheok, the beacon of scholarship, is no longer with us, I believe the several students he supervised and the countless others whom he touched, as well as those they have and seek to mentor will carry his torch to spread and share to the world his noble messages and deeds.

3. Volume Outline

A wide range of papers have been assembled in this special volume, which takes two issues from contributors from a myriad of backgrounds. Arguably one of Malaysia's

[3] See also Rasiah and Ishak (2000) and Stewart (2008) for arguments dealing with the trade-off between efficiency and political stability.

leading econometricians, Cheong Kee Cheok's tacitness include his appreciation for qualitative works, which is visible from his papers and books with Edmund Terence Gomez. In fact, in a number of my meetings with him he scoffed at number crunchers who did not make economic sense with their statistical works. His recent quantitative works include incisive books (e.g., Zhang et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021) while his recent qualitative publications include journal articles (e.g., Cheong & Than, 2022; Yu et al., 2022). While this paper introduces the wide range of research and publications Cheong Kee Cheok worked on, especially in his last years, the subsequent papers pay tribute to his exceptional scholarship with their own contributions. This section introduces the subsequent papers in both issues of the volume.

Lee et al. (2024) narrate in the second paper of the first issue that Cheong Kee Cheok's colleagues and remember him as an eminently qualified and respected economist who served at the Universiti Malaya and later at the World Bank before returning to Universiti Malaya. This paper focuses on Cheong Kee Cheok's grandfather, which is viewed largely from his lenses. His grandfather, Cheong Yoke Choy, was a pioneering and highly successful tin miner and banker in the early twentieth century in Kuala Lumpur. It was only over the last few years when Cheong Kee Cheok had retired from the World Bank that he devoted time to capture the exploits of Chinese businesses in Malaysia that Cheong Kee Cheok wrote about his grandfather from the entrepreneurial perspective. Distinctive in this paper is the manner in which Cheong Yoke Choy built his tin mining and banking businesses. Importantly, Cheong Yoke Choy became a significant contributor as a philanthropist and institutions builder so as to earn an OBE from the British government.

The third paper by Yeap et al. (2024) examines the main drivers and challenges of adopting Industrial Revolution (IR) 4.0 technologies in the electrical and electronics (E&E) industry in Malaysia. The findings of their paper indicate that the two strongest drivers for adoption of IR 4.0 technologies are internal benefits associated with raising production efficiency and reducing costs, contending at the same time that the biggest challenge faced by the E&E industry in its quest to absorb IR4.0 technologies are the shortage of necessary talents and skills, limited funds available for technological upgrading, and a lack of convincing business evidence to justify such investment.

Zhang et al (2024) in the fourth paper use the global value chain (GVC) approach as the most important driver of globalisation that profoundly shapes state-market relations and the international political economy approach to analyse Malaysia's structural power location in GVCs. In doing so, the paper deploys the OECD's inter-country input-output tables from 1995 to 2018 to construct two indicators, viz., power of value-added (PV) and interaction of value-added (IV) to measure Malaysia's structural power in the GVCs. The results show that Malaysia's PV in GVCs has declined over the years. High GVC participation but with a low GVC position indicates that Malaysia's export sector remains stuck in low value-added activities despite being highly integrated into global production networks. The paper also shows that Malaysia's value-added interaction with the major economic powers, such as the US, China and Japan is relatively low.

Wong and Lim (2024) argue in the fifth paper that Malaysia's efforts to break out from the vicious cycle of low productivity-cum-low wage trap as a consequence of ineffective attempts to form a successful coalition to stimulate industrial upgrading.

They go on to argue that the underperforming coalition has not only failed to make material progress but is also increasingly facing an isolationist international trade and investment climate that has encouraged transnational corporations to reshore productive activities back to their home economies. Three reasons are advanced to explain why Malaysia is stuck in the middle-income trap. Firstly, the Malaysian economy is struggling to establish a competitive niche, thereby becoming reliant increasingly on extractive and service-based industries, while its labour-intensive activities are struggling to adapt to the demands of Industry 4.0. Secondly, there is insufficient interest in the promotion of indigenous technologies and industrial upgrading. The state-business coalition has primarily focused on highly regulated, non-tradable industries, such as utility provision, banking and real estate. Thirdly, they observe a skills mismatch between policies to promote science and technology education and the labour market's demand for general, undifferentiated skills to support low value-added operations.

Nazeer and Rasiah (2024) investigate in the sixth paper the role of institutions in Pakistan's efforts to stimulate technological progress, with a focus on institutional quality, technology transfer and technological progress. As the evidence amassed over the period 1996–2020 shows, Pakistan's institutional quality ranks way lower than the successful industrialisers of East Asia, such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan. The findings underscore the importance of policymakers in Pakistan directing their attention to fostering skills and competencies essential for stimulating patent filing and cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset to support institutional change.

In the seventh paper, Tham (2024) presents a synthesis of ten years of Chinese investments in Malaysia with a focus on the Belt and Road Initiative that was launched in 2013. She argues that the focus on a few mega projects tends to provide a misleading view that Chinese investments are motivated by geoeconomic interests alone rather than commercial interests. She uses an antecedent, decision and outcome (ADO) framework to shed light on the nature, drivers, motivations and outcomes of these investments to conclude that Chinese investments in Malaysia vary by sectors, drivers and entry modes while contending that its long-term impact on technology transfer as unclear.

Gomez (2024) starts the eighth paper stating that China's hegemonic leader, Xi Jinping, had one core agenda, i.e., the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), which was to be implemented largely by deploying his country's state-owned enterprises (SOEs). He documents evidence of BRI projects since 2013 featuring extensively in Southeast Asia, a region in which strong leaders leading their economies characterised by pervasive state intervention. He argues that the expansion in the presence of China's SOEs in Southeast Asia led to major changes in the nature of state-business relations (SBRs). The paper goes on answer the question of where structural power lies between China and the host nation. In doing so the paper seeks to address China's rising presence in Southeast Asia through the BRI, the growing role of SOEs in these economies, and the evolving SBRs.

In the ninth paper, Li and Cheong (2024) examine critically the role of the Bank of China (BOC) from its focus on supporting China's governments. Since the BOC assumes the strategic role to support China's interests, its policy responsibilities include supporting China's "Going Out" strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative. Most BOC's Malaysian business only deal with the home (China) country's international business rather than the host (Malaysia) country's local business. Although some efforts have been taken to strengthen its local business and to localise, the paper argues that the internationalisation of the BOC has focused most on the internationalisation of renminbi rather than the internationalisation of the bank/company. Consequently, the paper contends that its focus on home activities makes the BOC Malaysian operations less competitive internationally.

In the tenth and final paper of the first issue, Cheong et al. (2024) assert that the arrival of the global financial crisis (GFC) a decade after the Asian financial crisis (AFC) to have settled the argument about whether the world had learned so much that economic crises are no longer possible. Yet, they contend that it has not settled the argument of whether lessons were learned. In doing so, the paper acknowledges that these crises emerged through a combination of factors that were as different as they were similar between one crisis and another. Indicators just before the onset of the GFC and of its impact showed that some, but not all, lessons from the AFC were indeed learned. However, whatever lessons learned, Southeast Asian stock markets were quickly decimated but rebounded swiftly. While significant lessons were learnt from the AFC, the GFC showed that Southeast Asian economies are heavily exposed to the vicissitudes of global business swings and with that are expected to remain vulnerable to future crises.

The first paper of the second issue (eleventh overall) of Cheong Kee Cheok's special volume by Yip and Lau (2024) examines the relationship between firm performance and environmental and social governance (ESG) practices among Malaysia's public-listed companies. In doing so, it evaluates to establish if the relationship varies with firms' market capitalisation, total liabilities and free cash flow using firm-level data from 72 companies covered in the FTSE4Good Bursa Malaysia (F4GBM) index from 2014 to 2022. The results show that ESG practice is positively and significantly associated with firm performance but is conditional on the firm-specific variables. In particular, the positive impact of ESG practices is significant for firms with high market capitalisation. Also, the positive impact of ESG practices diminishes as firms accumulate higher liabilities. Finally, the positive impact of ESG practices prevails if firms attain a high level of free cash flow.

In the second paper of the second issue (twelfth overall), Lim and Goh (2024) examine the influence of environmental factors in the determination of a country's creditworthiness against the world agenda to contain the rise in global temperature. Leveraging on two environmental factor proxies, CO_2 emissions per capita and renewable energy per capita, they assess whether environmental factors play a significant role in determining the sovereign credit ratings (SCRs) issued by three leading credit rating agencies (CRAs), i.e., Moody's, S&P and Fitch for 49 countries spanning the period of 2000 to 2021. Their empirical results show that the environmental factor is being considered by the CRAs. Indeed, they argue that since the signing of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the environmental factor figures significantly in the determination of the SCRs of developing countries, but not for the developed countries as the creditworthiness of developing countries is subjected to a penalty for CO_2 emissions. Meanwhile, while the level of renewable energy adoption is higher amongst the developed countries, the evidence does not show that their level of CO_2 emissions is lower.

Zhang et al. (2024) in the third paper (thirteenth overall) start with a narrative on China's determination to move from ecological civilisation to the modernisation of harmonious coexistence between man and nature to the dual-carbon goal of carbon neutrality that led to the enactment of the Environmental Protection Tax Law in 2018, which is the country's first new green tax. Through a comprehensive review of this development, their multi-dimensional effects and tax optimisation paths of China's environmental protection tax, this paper seeks to provide important reference for government departments in the country to improve the construction of the green tax system for enterprises to enhance their green governance capabilities, and for scholars to extend the study of the green tax system.

The fourth paper of the second issue (fourteenth overall) by Thillainathan and Cheong (2024) assesses Malay entry into business in the context of scaling the height of Corporate Malaysia in the post-1985 period. While there is a voluminous discussion of the rentier route taken by Malay businessmen in Malaysia (see for example, Gomez & Jomo, 1997), this paper analyses from the perspective of economics, the policies, programmes and instruments the government used in promoting Malay entry into business, and its consequences in the post-1985 period following the launching of corporatisation and privatisation in the country. The paper goes on to discuss the performance, as well as the key problems and issues encountered in general, and its impact specifically on government linked investment companies (GLICs) in promoting Malay entry, and the private finance initiative (PFI) or the build, lease, maintain and transfer model in promoting entry as owner-manager in the era of corporatisation and institutional fund management, as well as of multiple instruments.

The fifth paper of the second issue (fifteenth overall) by Lee and Nagaraj (2024) focus on Malaysia to explain why it did not graduate into a high-income economy among the six that managed to do so among the thirteen assessed by the Commission on Growth and Development (CGD) by going beyond credible leadership to examine individual political leaders. They argue that the key political leaders, such as Okubo Toshimichi of Japan, Park Chung Hee of South Korea, Chiang Kai Shek of Taiwan, and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore overcame the external, existential threats to pave the way for them to catch up with the developed economies.

In the sixth paper of the second issue and sixteenth overall, Nagaraj and Lee (2024) contrast five East Asian nations that successfully leveraged globalisation to achieve sustained high economic growth in the post-war period concluding that Malaysia has not made the transition beyond upper-middle income to high-income status, unlike Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. They appraise in the paper Malaysia's political leadership to unravel the reasons for its restrained growth with a focus on the demeanour and acumen of Malaysia's prime ministers in economic decision-making. While they found the early leaders more transformational to set Malaysia on the path to income growth, they argue that the political leaders since the 1980s have been more transactional, using race and religious divides to entrench political power, cronyism and corruption, which has led to an erosion in social capabilities thereby creating serious deficits in the quality of human capital, critical-thinking capabilities of the civil service, and the integrity and independence of the institutions of economic governance.

Lee (2024) in the seventh paper of the second issue (seventeenth overall) addresses the role of human capital in economies undergoing structural transformation to support technological upgrading and sustained trade competitiveness. He makes the point that production and consumption amenities are essential to develop, attract and support a workforce with high human capital arguing that different types of production and consumption amenities are important for different kinds of activities. In doing so, he contends that human capital growth is likely to be accompanied by worsening inequality, which requires complementary policies that promote inclusiveness without dampening human capital development.

Based on Khazanah Research Institute's (KRI) descriptive study in 2017, Yong and Pau (2024) in paper eight of the second issue (eighteenth overall) deployed a multinomial logistic regression analysis to estimate the probability of employment choice by different job categories to validate the presence of job polarisation over the period 2011–2017. They argue that technology has changed the nature of skills required to perform the same tasks. They contend that the adoption of technology depends on the firm's or industry's foresight of how the technology may change the productivity of their workers. Since under circumstances of investment costs of technology exceeding training costs, firms may not adopt the technology, having a foresight of how the technology may change the performance of tasks, then the recruitment of workers that is cognizant of the upskilling programme shall clear out the phenomenon of job polarisation.

In paper nine of the second issue (nineteenth overall) Mi et al. (2024) investigate using microdata from China's Social Surveys conducted in 2010 and 2021 the evolving gender gap in China's digital workforce. Specifically, this paper explores the influence of factors, such as gender, age, education, number of children, internet usage, and regional disparities on digital employment among male and female workers. The findings of the paper show that while women face challenges in employment, there is a trend towards greater gender equality in the digital sector. While childbearing and childrearing have hindered women's participation in the digital workforce, the evidence shows that this barrier has been diminishing. Educational attainment and internet usage have emerged as significant predictors of digital employment for both genders, highlighting the importance of enhancing digital literacy and access to technology.

Ding et al. (2024) tackle the dilemma faced by ethnic Chinese in their efforts to grapple with the need to learn Malay and English in Malaysia while trying to acquire Mandarin to keep their Chinese identity in the tenth paper of the second issue (twentieth overall). As language is key in nation-building and national identity, this paper examines the challenges faced by the ethnic Chinese population to learn Malay and acquire fluency in English for economic mobility. Should they opt for vernacular education, they will have to deal with Mandarin, which is not their native/heritage language. Adopting a quantitative method, this study examines how Hakka communities in East Malaysia navigate these challenges and the consequences of their decisions on language use. The specific questions they address are: 1) what is the impact of the MOI on language used by students at home, and socially?, 2) has this impact been altered with intergenerational change?, and 3) how has language use impacted their identities? The findings show that the Hakka language is used less in everyday conversations. The need to preserve Hakka language to retain their ethnic identity is perceived to be less important, especially among the younger generation, which is most evident among those who attended Mandarin speaking schools, particularly the Chinese independent schools.

4. Conclusion

For such talents Cheong Kee Cheok demonstrated it is hard to confine him just to economics, though he clearly demonstrated the highest levels of economic reasoning. I would say that he was very much into the doors of philosophy, which is the mother field of all disciplines. Kee Cheok put his critical mind to address issues incisively regardless of his disciplinary origins. In doing so, he showed that he was not a typical economist. Indeed, he was an economist with an open and critical mind who was ready to open his inductive lenses to question assumptions. I for one who not only shared several viewpoints in the many discussions we had, from dealing with basic faculty and student issues to national and world politics, but more so with taking on unfinished debates to reflect and return to continue our newfound excitement on theorising about the real world.

Importantly, it must be recognised that the contributions to honour Cheong Kee Cheok are also areas of focus that he himself touched on. His extraordinary understanding of economics and political economy transcended the limits of normal humans. I must say that I was fortunate to have known him as a person and as an economist. His passing remains etched in me as a huge chunk of experiential and tacit knowledge that will be missed by many of us. Unfortunately, one of his sons, Adrian Cheong Heng Luen passed away quickly after his bereavement. He is now survived by his widow, Sun May Lin, and the second son, Julian Cheong Heng Mun.

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