Fascinated by all things Chinese

Professor Kenneth Dean is the first non-Chinese to head the Chinese studies department at NUS

Professor Kenneth Dean grew up in Taiwan and Hong Kong. He was speaking a mix of Hokkien, Mandarin and English before he turned one.

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About three months ago, Prof Dean accepted NUS offer to head the department, which he has always held in high regard.

"I am very honoured and excited to be moving to Singapore to take up this new position," he says.

An NUS spokesman says Prof Dean was chosen because he has an outstanding reputation in the field of Chinese religious studies and is one of the world’s leading scholars in Chinese popular religion.

"He will strengthen the department’s research on the linkages between South-East Asia and China, as well as the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, which are two of the department’s research foci," he says.

Adds Associate Professor Su Jiuling, 52, the department’s current acting head: "Professor Dean’s Chinese is excellent. I can talk to him in Mandarin about everything."

"He is a researcher at the cutting edge of Chinese religions, and his books on popular religion in Fujian province have become classic studies in the field."

The elder of two sons, Prof Dean was born in Holland to two American diplomats.

At the age of six months, he was taken to Taiwan, where his father was stationed for about eight years, on and off.

In his formative years, Prof Dean learnt Mandarin from his parents, who are fluent in the language, and Hokkien from the two Taiwanese maids serving his family.

Before I turned one year old, I was speaking a mix of Hokkien, Mandarin and English," he says.

As a child, he recalls being fascinated by Chinese temples in Taiwan and the massive celebrations held in them.

"There'd be fireworks exploding, clouds of incense drifting around and colourful banners and costumes all around the temple - my senses were overwhelmed," says Prof Dean, who has also lived in China and Hong Kong.

"Yet, among all the chaos, I could sense some sort of order. The experience was so powerful, I sometimes still dream about these celebrations."

As he grew older, so did his interest in all things Chinese.

The biggest obstacle to mastering the language is a lack of an "immersive linguistic environment", he notes.

"Some Singaporeans speak in a mixture of English and Mandarin, but this can be problematic because it prevents them from developing a strong vocabulary in either language," he points out.

"The best way, I feel, is still immersion - travelling or studying in Chinese-speaking environments. Having more classes and subjects taught in Chinese at the primary, secondary and junior college levels will also help, as this will enable students to use the language at a higher level later in life."

In 1974, Prof Dean became so proficient in Chinese that he wrote his college application essay to Brown University in the language, and was admitted.

For the last 25 years, he has been a professor at Macquarie University in Canada.

He is married to a 39-year-old American musician and they have two children, aged 30 and 24.

His family is based in the United States and Canada, and will visit him regularly when he moves to Singapore in January.

"My whole family can speak Mandarin and write some Chinese. We feel this is an invaluable skill, given China's growing global influence," he says.

"I have a great respect for Chinese culture - its key values of courtesy and humaneness, its strong endorsement of virtuous conduct and its conviction that people can always improve themselves," he says.

Reading new topics and documents in Chinese has always helped keep my passion for the language alive. I have also had many wonderful friends and teachers who helped me learn Chinese."

Since 2006, he has been a visiting professor at NUS teaching courses on Chinese religion and South-East Asian Chinese temples.