

# PhD + JD = Complicated!



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George grew up in Los Angeles (L.A.). For many, L.A. is a mecca for ethnic diversity. But George “felt a little out of place” for having a Vietnamese father and a Filipino mother. In college, George found home, so to speak, in Asian American studies. “For the first time in my life I felt like my identity made sense and that I was part of a larger community,” he explained. But after spending his junior summer studying in the Philippines, he became interested in Southeast Asia. “I realized studying Southeast Asia was what I wanted to do, not just to understand Asian America, but also to understand the region on its own terms,” George said.

After college, George pursued a PhD in Sociology at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and carried out his fieldwork in Mindanao, the Philippines. But his Asian American identity “made research... complicated.” “One scholar [in the

Philippines] told me that my Asian American identity was a disadvantage and pointedly chastised me for my poor grammar in Tagalog," George recalled. Also, his cohort made matters a lot worse for him. "Some graduate students spread rumors among faculty members that I was an undercover CIA agent," George added.

Upon finishing his PhD, George felt that he had to "grow up" and pursue a "practical" career. He chose to "study law at UW" because it had a "strong Asian law program," and being at UW would allow him to "remain connected to Southeast Asian studies." His PhD, however, did not help him at all with the JD program. He felt "distracted." "I was more interested in my language and history classes...while law firms were more interested in very detailed issues like the calculation of consequential damages or how to get a case tossed out on jurisdictional grounds," George explained.

Things, however, have come full circle for George. He's currently a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at NUS. "I love what I do here," George said. In fact, he has turned down two job offers to stay at NUS. He appreciates the ability to combine his "interests in sociology and the law" in his teaching while carrying out new research, such as the "sociology of emotions." George acknowledges that there's an expiration date for every job, but at the moment he's just taking it all in – one moment at a time.

## Interview

### **Could you tell me what drew you to Southeast Asian Studies? Was there a particular moment that you knew you wanted to study SEA?**

My interest in studying Southeast Asia stems from my personal history. My parents came from various parts of Southeast Asia: my father was a refugee of the Vietnam War, and my mother an immigrant from the Philippines. Growing up, there weren't many Vietnamese-Filipino Americans in my neighborhood.

Even though the city I grew up in, Los Angeles, California, was incredibly diverse, I still felt a little out of place. When I got to college, I stumbled across an Asian American studies course and loved it. For the first time in my life I felt like

my identity made sense and that I was part of a larger community. At that point I decided that I wanted to work in the Asian American community and work either at the policy level or at a community based organization.

In preparation for this career, in my junior year, I decided to write an honors thesis. Because there was funding to go abroad, I used this as an opportunity to travel to the Philippines in the summer between my junior and senior year, write a thesis on a topic in the Philippines, learn Tagalog, and come back to the US with a greater understanding of issues in the Philippines to better serve the Filipino American community. And since I was entering my final year of college, I decided to take advantage of being in Asia by studying abroad in Vietnam that fall. These trips changed my life. It was over those seven months in Southeast Asia that I realized studying Southeast Asia was what I wanted to do, not just to understand Asian America, but also to understand the region on its own terms.

**What was it like having a PhD then pursuing a JD at UW? What drew you to the JD program at UW? And did having a PhD help with the JD?**

When I signed up for the PhD, it was kind of by chance. I had just finished studying abroad in the Philippines for a year (I went back after my honors thesis) and after a short internship in Washington DC in my final year, I decided I wanted to spend time outside of the United States. I pursued a PhD at the National University of Singapore because I wanted to learn more about the “war on terror” from a Southeast Asian perspective. By the time I was finishing up my PhD, I had met amazing people, seen the world, and explored issues that interested me for several years. But at the same time I felt that I was being drawn into academic debates I wasn’t interested in and thought it was generally time to “grow up” and do something “practical.” I chose to study law at UW because it’s a great law school, the law school has a strong Asian law program, and the excellent main campus resources allowed me to remain connected to Southeast Asian studies.

But in my experience, the PhD actually didn’t help with the JD itself. I was too distracted. I was more interested in my language and history classes on the main campus, while law firms were more interested in very detailed issues like

the calculation of consequential damages or how to get a case tossed out on jurisdictional grounds. I felt like my PhD made me stand out as too intellectual, overly-educated, and not committed to these “minor” debates—even though I did find some of the work interesting. After graduation, though, I chose to work for the courts in part to get back to larger policy issues that required meticulous writing and thorough research—skills I practiced as a PhD student.

### **How did you feel about being a Southeast Asian American doing Southeast Asian studies?**

Although being Asian American is what drew me to the field, it also made doing research in the field complicated. Filipino scholars can be very territorial, particularly when it comes to my research interest of Mindanao. Although all researchers have to be ready for criticism, the criticisms or attacks that most affected me were those based on my ethnic heritage. One scholar told me that my Asian American identity was a disadvantage and pointedly chastised me for my poor grammar in Tagalog. In Singapore, some graduate students spread rumors among faculty members that I was an undercover CIA agent. While these experiences seem ridiculous now, they were certainly discouraging at the time. Eventually, I learned to recognize the criticisms for what they are—consequences of the American footprint in the region and the trials and tribulations of being a product of the Southeast Asian diaspora.

### **What are doing now? And is it close to what you envisioned when you started graduate school?**

Currently, I am a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. At NUS, I get to combine my interests in sociology and the law by teaching courses on law and society, special topics in law and justice, as well as engage my other research areas such as the sociology of emotions. I love teaching in Singapore because I am able to use my knowledge of Southeast Asia in every class. Initially, I thought that this would be temporary since it's a little weird teaching where you went to school. I was also afraid that my PhD from NUS was going to make it that I'd be stuck at NUS forever. Since I've started teaching at NUS, however, I've had two job offers elsewhere (one with a

UK university and the other with a Singapore university) and I turned them both down because I love what I do here. Is it what I envisioned when I started graduate school? Funny enough — it is exactly what I envisioned. I acknowledge that being an academic is very tough, and as with the law, many times the job has an expiration date, but for now, I cherish every moment.

**Do you have any funny or embarrassing story about doing research or working in SEA that you don't mind sharing?**

I guess there were a lot of confusing moments for me as I did field research. Growing up in a Vietnamese-Filipino household, it was hard for me to separate what was "Filipino" and what was "Vietnamese." For instance, I was shocked when my extended family in the Philippines pulled out the pancit (a Filipino noodle dish) and had no chopsticks to eat it with. But one thing about the Philippines that I grew to love, even as contrary as it may be to the dietary restrictions of some of the people I worked with, is lechon (pork). I love lechon. Lechon kawali (crispy pork), lechon paksiw (stewed pork), all of it. I still remember one particular party in the village I worked in. As a foreigner, they invited me as a special guest to the head table to take a bite of the recently roasted lechon. As I took a bite of the sumptuous pork, every sensory gland was on overload and I was transported to another universe. I swear could feel the pork down in my toes. After my transcendental five seconds, I realized I did feel the pork down in my toes. Apparently, I was standing too close to the table and all the fat from the roasted pork was running down my pants. I had a huge oily wet spot right around the crotch area that was difficult to remove from the single pair of jeans that I wore for the several months I did fieldwork. Luckily, people weren't very formal in my community so my clothes didn't matter when I was asked the next week to be a judge at the region-wide beauty pageant (which I did not find out was for transsexual participants until part of the way through the event) or when I was asked to bestow a goat upon the winner of the local cooking contest a few weeks later. Needless to say, my experience in the field was filled with numerous lighthearted moments that stay with me till this day.

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# Topics

Alumni

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