



Ivan at the Cafe Apartments in Ho Chi Minh City.

Ivan Cenon Vinluan Bernardo

Asian Development Bank Scholarship

Tell us more about your hometown.

Throughout my life, I have always considered Caloocan City, which is in the northernmost part of the Metropolitan Manila area, as my hometown. Apart from being a manufacturing and ecozone hub in the Metro district, Caloocan City is mostly known to Filipinos as the birthplace of the Philippine Revolution. Specific episodes that happened here, like the Cry of Balintawak, led the way for Filipino independence from colonizers.

What non-academic pursuits do you enjoy?

I recently started learning German on the recommendation of friends. German might be a useful skill if I choose to pursue a Foreign Service engagement when I move back to the Philippines.

Moreover, I always like to explore places around me, so in my free time, I like to hunt for the nearest Michelin star

establishments, Catholic churches, tourist spots, and local events. This is a great way to discover the hidden gems of Singapore.

Tell us about your favourite Economics class taken at NUS.

If I were to shortlist any, it would probably be ECA5396: The Economics of Business and Law of Intellectual Assets by Prof. Jack Cheng since he does not only touch upon the frameworks and valuation processes for ideas and innovations, but also advises students on the most important things for a university student, which is the value of history and lifelong learning. Then, there's ECA5342: Advanced International Trade by Prof. Zhang Chi, where she introduced methods and models that explain how the globalized and hyper-connected world is shaped. And lastly, EC5326: Policy Impact Evaluation Methods, by Prof. Joris Mueller, taught me that there will always be room for improvement and contributions in economics as you look at one economic question through many different lenses.

If you could go back in time by five years, what would you do differently as a student?

If I could go back to my undergraduate year, I think I would only change one thing, and that is to expose myself more to different experiences and expand my network early on.

I would expand my network in two ways. The first is connecting with industry practitioners and alumni. Looking back, the only way to minimize risk and time finding the perfect first job is to know the people who work in these sectors, not just attending info sessions or talks but talking and engaging with them. The other will be to join more college case competitions. This is a good way to expand your network with high-caliber people that you can work with in the future.

Case competitions also help in acquiring new skills, specifically they prepare you to solve high level and real-life problems for organizations. I have participated in my fair share of case competitions, finishing first runner-up for a JP Morgan Challenge, but I think there were more experiences to be gained if I only engaged in more competitions.

What are some moments in NUS that were most memorable to you?

I will always look back at how NUS can break down boundaries and forge long-lasting friendships within and beyond the classroom. On top of this, sharing planned and spontaneous bonding sessions with the batchmates will always be a memorable experience for me. Shoutout to our student reps for organising a great Mooncake Festival Celebration and hiking excursion.



Ivan (in blue) celebrating the end of the semester on St John's Island with classmates before some monkeys showed up.

What are your research interests?

My research interests are in political economy, development economics, and economic history. I am interested in examining how institutions impact economic development, with a focus on the evolution of informal institutions (e.g., elite groups, militia, and religions) and their economic effects. My research addresses fundamental questions in political economy and economic history, such as how institutions promote economic development and how formal institutions interact with informal institutions. China, with its rich historical context and persistent cultural norms, serves as the primary focus of my research.

Tell us about some of your current research.

The first stream of my research examines the interplay between states and informal institutions. Informal institutions, which can either coordinate with or compete against formal institutions, greatly affect economic prosperity. In the first chapter of my dissertation, titled "Rooted in the Land: Clanship and Land Market in China", I examine how kin-based institution (e.g., clan and tribes) exert influence over local governments in modern economies. Using data from China's primary land market and a nationwide genealogy dataset, I employ spatial matching to estimate the clan's causal impacts on land parcel prices, which are a crucial source of local fiscal revenue. I find that firms linked to local clans buy land at prices that are 1.3%-3.0% lower than those without clanship connections, which is caused by potential nepotism with local officials. When the central government launched anti-corruption campaigns, clans no longer received discounts in land transactions and their involvement instead supported economic prosperity. This suggests it is possible to reduce the negative impact of kin-based institutions on economic prosperity while still retaining their advantages.

The second stream of my research focuses on how economic development occurs within weak states, particularly through the actions of militia dictators. Building upon Olson's (1993) theoretical model, which distinguishes between "stationary bandits" and "roving bandits", I investigate the empirical evidence supporting this framework that "stationary bandits" who have a long planning horizon are more willing to promote economic growth. In my second chapter, titled "Do 'Stationary Bandits' Promote Economic Growth?", I construct a comprehensive historical dataset that complies with a natural experimental design, and show that local warlords, compared to non-local warlords, contribute more to spurring China's economic growth in the early twentieth century (1912-1927). Local warlords, acting as "stationary bandits," tend to provide more public goods (e.g., telegrams, railways, and hospitals), expropriate fewer taxes, and maintain social stability, resulting in better economic development. I also plan to study how warlords cooperate with local elites to achieve their economic aims.

What challenges have you faced as a PhD student?

One of the most significant challenges I faced was gaining a systematic understanding of my research field. To address this, I found that reading literature reviews published in the *Journal of Economic Literature* provides a quick introduction to various topics. After deciding on my research topic, focusing on the related literature helped me identify the latest research gaps in my area of interest. Furthermore, as a researcher in economic history, I delved into papers written by economists, as well as books authored by political scientists and historians. Although this process demanded



Wentian sampling Indonesian cuisine in Bali.

Diao Wentian**Goh Keng Swee PhD Scholarship**

a significant investment of time, it was necessary to develop a comprehensive research perspective.

Research often entails psychological challenges too. I have experienced moments of depression during my research journey. To navigate these emotional hurdles, I discovered a few strategies that proved invaluable. First, I have accepted that research progress may not always be substantial, and have learned to appreciate the process of thinking rather than fixating solely on results. Second, by focusing on the present instead of on the past or the future, I try to continue working, even under pressure and have found myself better equipped to tackle challenges head-on. Lastly, the support of my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Sng Tuan Hwee, as well as my friends, family, and life partner, has played an essential role during moments of distress.

Another challenge I encountered was networking within the academic community. Proficient communication with students and professors is vital for growth and collaboration. Fortunately, our department provides many platforms, such as brown bag seminars, for Ph.D. students to present preliminary research work and to interact.

Participating in such events allows me to enhance my communication skills and receive insightful comments from professors. Additionally, along with my fellow cohort members Wang Song and Wu Ziye, I organized a student workshop aimed at fostering communication among our peers and students from other esteemed universities across the world.

Tell us about your hobbies and what you do for fun.

I enjoy cooking.. It offers boundless possibilities for creativity. Exploring recipes uncovers the magic of spice and ingredient combinations. Understanding diverse histories and culture behind cuisines connects me to the stories of people across the world. New foods and flavours excite me, making the journey a refreshing break from research.