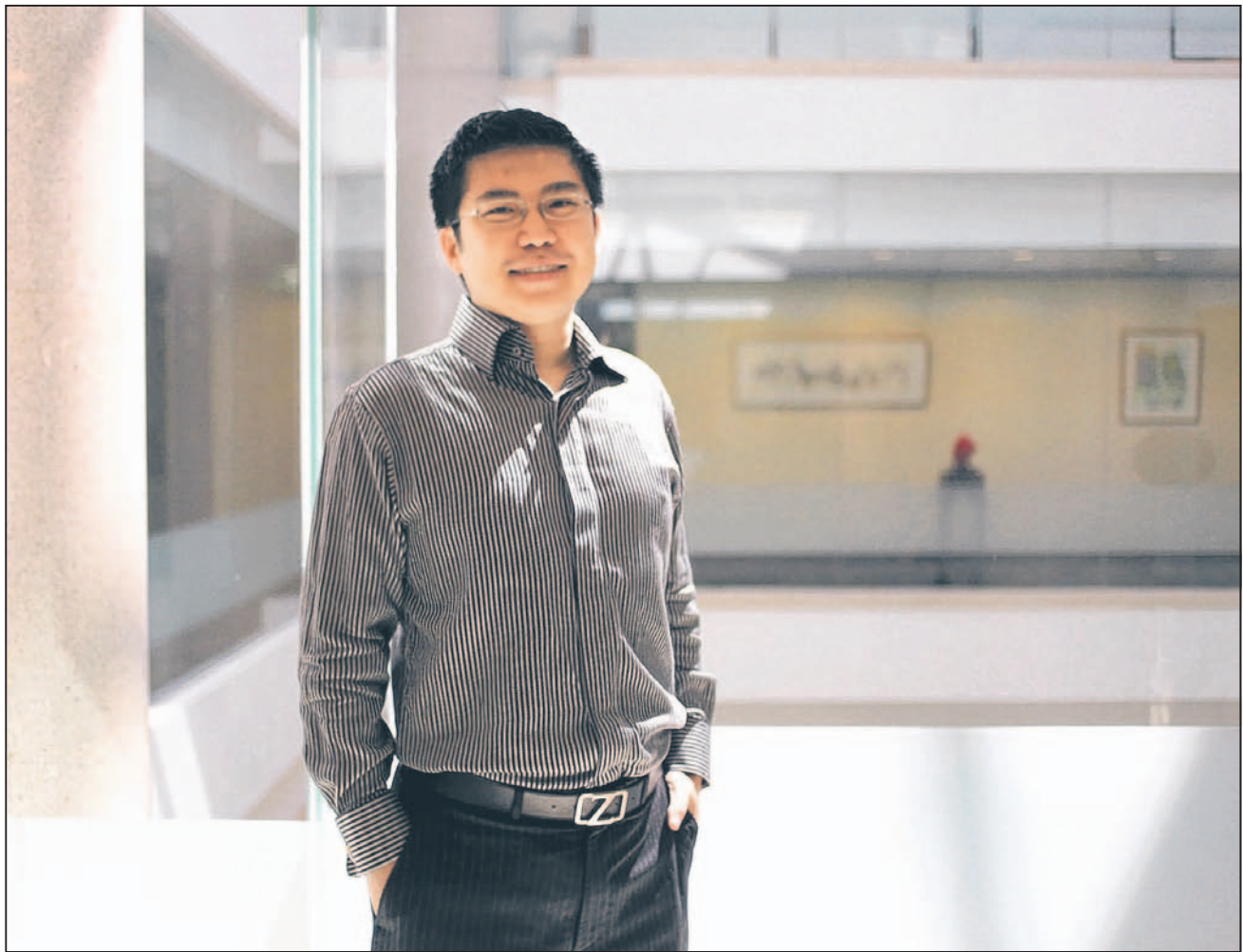


SEIZE THE CHANCE

“Don’t think too much, or think that you are too good for China. It is the biggest story of the 21st century.”

Mr Philip Ong (right), giving his advice to Singaporeans thinking of going to work or study in China



ST PHOTO: SIM CHI YIN

Chinese among his closest buddies

AS THE thorn among the roses in his Chinese class, Mr Philip Ong was nicknamed “Jia Baoyu” – the effeminate protagonist in the classic Chinese novel, *Dream Of The Red Chamber*.

Putting up with the teasing from his classmates has paid off for him.

It was in those Higher Chinese lessons at Victoria Junior College that Mr Ong developed a passion for things Chinese.

The chatty 31-year-old, who is now a First Secretary at the Singapore Embassy in Beijing, can still rattle off passages from that novel, which was his A-level text, to explain why he thrives here.

Using his early proficiency in the language, he chose in 1996 to do his university studies at Beijing University (Beida), reading International Relations on a Public Service Commission scholarship, while most of his peers headed for the

West.

“Beida is the Harvard of China, you know. I had a gut feel that it was what I wanted, and I saw that I would have a very interesting four years here,” Mr Ong told *The Straits Times* last week.

After getting over the initial discomfort of living in a dormitory “more spartan than my Basic Military Training bunk”, he found himself in the thick of lively campus debates over the Hong Kong handover in 1997, the death of Deng Xiaoping, the People’s Republic of China’s 50th birthday and Beijing’s Olympics bid.

Following stints in public service in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, Mr Ong returned to China to join the embassy in Beijing last year.

His *guanxi* (relationships) from university days served him well. And, he said:

“When I tell locals I was at Beida, it shrinks the distance immediately. It’s no longer a Singapore official meeting a Chinese official. It’s one Beida alumnus meeting another.”

Mr Ong, who counts four Chinese among his closest buddies now, urged Singaporeans to seize the chance to be part of “the biggest story of the 21st century”.

He said: “While we need to understand our neighbours and the West, China is a window of opportunity and we do have an advantage here. We’d be silly not to ride on it.

“And my generation has been very fortunate. If I had been born earlier, it might have still been revolution in China. If I had been born later, Beijing would be so developed we might not be able to see the difference between it and Manhattan.”

SIM CHI YIN