# Tale of two tigers

Aspirant research hubs in southeast Asia have enjoyed contrasting fortunes.

When Malaysia and Singapore became politically distinct entities in 1965, a yawning chasm soon developed between the two nations' scientific performance — and it continues to grow.

Under the skilful tutelage of Philip Yeo, a businessman and former engineer, Singapore is creating one of the world's most dynamic research environments. The system built up by Yeo since he took control of the nation's science policy has given the country's biotechnology the promise of a bright future (see page 767). Despite some questions about the commitment of Singapore's government to free expression, the island nation has succeeded in attracting both leading scientists and substantial business investment from abroad, offering grants with few strings and a cosmopolitan research environment that is conducive to international collaboration.

Some concerns have been expressed about the reliance of Singapore's success on Yeo's own energy and influence. But there is ample evidence that he has put in place a meritocratic system that will comfortably outlive the oversight of one individual. In just two decades, Singapore has established itself as an important regional hub for biological research, with particular strengths in genomics and cancer research.

Malaysia's attempts to establish itself scientifically have been far less successful (see *Nature* **436,** 620–621; 2005). The country has sought in vain to establish a biotechnology industry, the most conspicuous failure being the BioValley project near Kuala Lumpur. New independent universities, emphasizing their dedication to cutting-edge research, have been built after considerable political negotiation, but they are struggling to establish themselves as internationally competitive.

Part of Malaysia's problem lies in educational and hiring policies that favour native ethnic Malays, at the expensive of native ethnic Chinese and Indians, as well as foreigners. It is understandable that the Malaysian government wants to take measures to preserve the opportunities for a group that makes up the majority of its population, but which, by some measures, remains economically and socially disadvantaged.

But accusations abound that the existing system is not sufficiently meritocratic, and that personal connections often predominate in decision-making, with regard to both hiring opportunities and the distribution of grants. Science also enjoys insufficient autonomy within the Malaysian government. And in instances such as the BioValley project, investment has been showered on infrastructure, rather than on people.

Malaysia, of course, is not the only country in the region where research suffers from political mismanagement. China, Japan and others are also prone to over-investment in facilities, as opposed to personnel; difficulties in the fair evaluation of grants; and problems in fully engaging with outside scientists from neighbouring countries and further afield.

**"Singapore's success could serve as a focal point for more scientific collaboration in the region."**

Singapore's success provides a useful model in this regard. It could also serve as a focal point for more scientific collaboration in the region. East Asian countries have never found it easy to work together. The Asia-Pacific International Molecular Biology Network (www.a-imbn.org), for example, has sought for years to build a firmer foundation in the manner of the European Molecular Biology Organization, which helped to build the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg, Germany.

Singapore, with its recent track record of attracting top-notch researchers, would be the ideal location for any such regional collaboration. It could also act as a bridge between researchers in China, Japan and South Korea, where bitter rivalries have hamstrung such projects in the past. And it might enable Singapore to export some of the approaches which Yeo has so successfully championed in his own country. ■