

# Profile: Youngsuk (‘YS’) Chi

**Vice Chairman, Elsevier and  
‘citizen of the world’**

*YS Chi was interviewed by Dan Tonkery on 5 June 2006*



Recently, I caught up with Youngsuk ('YS') Chi at his office in New York City and had an opportunity to talk with him about his reflections on our industry after his first year at Elsevier. This was the second time that I had had a chance to talk with him as I had met him on his first day in the job at Elsevier, at ALA in Chicago.

I found YS to be one of the most interesting individuals that I have met in our industry and his year traveling and learning about what is unique in our industry was very enlightening. While his background is in banking and book publishing, I believe his work in book distribution at Ingram especially prepared him for our side of the business.

YS was actually born in the United States, in Alexandria, Virginia, where his father was serving as a diplomat in the South Korean Embassy. Since he was born with diplomatic immunity, he was not eligible for US citizenship and had to go through the citizenship process as a separate activity, which he completed recently. It is his international living and traveling experience that YS says has made him a 'citizen of the world'. As a result of his father's successful diplomatic career, YS has traveled all over the world and has picked up six languages and lived in eight different countries. He returned to the US to attend high school and enrolled in Lawrenceville School in New Jersey with few English skills.

After high school he stayed in New Jersey as he liked the area, and went to Princeton University, graduated *cum laude*, and then continued his education at Columbia University, where he received

his MBA. It was at Princeton that he met John Ingram, the son of the famous Ingram family well known in our industry for their large book distribution company in Nashville. That introduction and friendship has continued to this day and, early in his career, YS worked at Ingram in a number of high-level management positions, including in the Chief Operating Office at Ingram Book Group and Ingram Distribution Holding, the parent company of Ingram. While he was at Ingram he co-founded Lightning Source.

In addition to his experience in the book distribution business, YS spent a number of highly successful years at American Express International and was located in the US, Mexico, England, France and Singapore. Most recently, before the position at Elsevier, he worked as Chairman of Random House Asia. That is where he met and worked with Erik Engstrom, the current Chairman of Elsevier. Frequently, CEOs look to people that they know and trust to be on their team and certainly, YS and Eric have a history that will enable them to work well together.

So what does YS do for Elsevier? The public announcement referred to his position as head of the company's global academic and customer relations, but the devil is in the details. YS's role is to strengthen relationships with all of Elsevier's key stakeholders around the globe and, after a year in the job, it sounds like he is moving in that direction. He has traveled thousands of miles seeing the key stakeholders. He has visited 30 or 40 key

library directors in the US, many of them movers and shakers in the United States' academic research library community. So, 40% of his time is spent working with senior librarians and another 40% working with actual scientists and Elsevier editors, to hear their concerns. A top priority for YS is to take the initiative to learn what is driving our industry and to listen to the many voices out there about where we are going and what Elsevier should be doing. He has attended ALA and other library meetings and has spent the past year learning and collecting experiences from our community.

The one thing he wished he had more of before joining Elsevier is a better understanding of user behavior, but he is quickly filling in the blanks on the behavior. He is a very 'quick study' and will bring a valuable insight into the workings of our industry. Already, he has picked up on the fact that while libraries respect Elsevier as a publisher and enjoy not only the content and depend on important innovations such as ScienceDirect and, more recently, Scopus, what the libraries are still fighting is the commercial model. Elsevier is such a dominant company in major libraries' materials budgets that it is easy to understand why the commercial model is always under review. Coming from a long family tradition of negotiation, YS is particularly troubled by some members in our industry who take the extremist position on Elsevier and are not willing to listen or consider some negotiation. He hopes that by building stronger relationships with the key stakeholders, some of these extremist positions will be recast into a workable dialog.

Some other key questions for YS that I presented had to do with the future of the journal or serial as a format. He predicted that the journal title as an individual brand will continue for many years as long as researchers consider that journal to be important to their field of study and research. Each title has a following of researchers in their specific community and the editor works to build that brand of quality and importance. However, that journal will also be available in a database and indexed in a secondary source like Scopus. So successful journals will continue to be sold as individual titles, included in ScienceDirect, and indexed in Scopus. As expected, we can look forward to some journals continuing their role in specific disciplines.

Another important question for YS was regarding the publisher's responsibility for archiving. To

my surprise, YS took a strong position, stating that it was in fact the publisher's responsibility to assist in this area. Other publishers are still debating this issue and frequently leave it to the library to manage the archive. Elsevier has recently joined Portico and I would bet you that YS had a strong hand in the process as he, Kevin Guthrie – a Princeton graduate who established Portico, and Bill Bowen – the former President of Princeton and President of the Andrew Mellon Foundation, are all linked via the Princeton connection where YS serves on the Princeton Board of Trustees. I would say that the Princeton connection or young boys' network is alive and well. Networking certainly pays off.

And now for the final questions ... Where is open access going and how will it impact Elsevier? What can be expected from Google? As expected, YS has to be cautious in his response to these two questions. I will try to give a summary without causing a stock market panic on Elsevier shares. Essentially, open access is just a phase we are going through in the evolution of scholarly communications. YS does not believe that open access is the final end product of this evolution, but just another street in the grand development, and that the final solution may not have even been developed. Perhaps out there is some struggling researcher working outside the walls of a large company that will create that solution. STM publishing fulfills a need in scientific communications, and the scientific communities that create and read the literature are the ones that are going to determine what works or does not work. So far, open access is the solution *de jour* but may not be the final solution.

As for Google, YS sees them much like a real estate developer who buys up a large track of land and then lets builders come in and build in that space, with the developer supplying the essential services. They are good at constructing the infrastructure and we will just have to wait to see what creative projects are built in that space.

YS Chi is a strong individual with impressive credentials and we can expect to see much more of him in our industry. He has a family and lives near Princeton, devoting much of his time to various charities as well as serving Princeton on several boards. We want to give YS a big welcome to the serials industry and wish him every success.