

# **A Tribute to Ooi Giok Ling**

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Speech

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Good afternoon, Senior Minister of State, Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee, family of Professor Ooi Giok Ling and all her dear friends.

I am grateful to Director of IPS, Amb Ong Keng Yong, and Deputy Director, Mr Arun Mahizhnan for giving me this opportunity to say something in honour of Professor Ooi Giok Ling today.

You may be relieved to know that I have no grand theories to expound on, no statistical data to dazzle you with, but just a few simple words to share with you from my heart. In sooth, this will hardly do justice to Giok Ling's rich legacy at IPS, and, on a more personal level, her lasting impact on my life as a fellow researcher and friend.

Let me begin by taking you back to 1996 when then Director, Prof Tommy Koh pulled Giok Ling and I aside to talk about an invitation for Singapore scholars to contribute their views at an international conference on civil society. As we discussed this invitation, we thought that we should perhaps convene our own conference on civil society in Singapore. In that way, IPS would provide a platform for civil society activists to define themselves and describe the space they occupied; they could explore ways to better engage not just each other, but also policymakers and the public at large. This was the genesis of my first major project with Giok Ling.

Through it, I discovered an intellectual and ideological affinity with this senior lady at IPS. Giok Ling firmly believed that urban planning would be effective only if it put the active participation of key stakeholders in society, the citizens' voices, at the centre of that process. For me, I was challenged by the question of how the views of our citizens could be incorporated into all areas

of policy-making by what would otherwise be known as the 'macho-meritocratic Singaporean State'. We both believed that this involvement of the citizenry would give our people a greater sense of ownership of the outcomes; we would all feel that this country was *our* living and breathing 'home with a difference'. This feeling of engagement, ownership, belonging is what our next Director, Dr Lee Tsao Yuan referred to as 'The Singapore Heartbeat'. Giok Ling may have been born in Malaysia but her Singapore Heartbeat was just as strong as it is in the best of us. She demonstrated this in thought, word, and deed.

Giok Ling was never one to do things by half-measure. For example, when we wrote the proposal for this project, begging for money, as we often did from the Lee Foundation, it was really a "three-in-one" project. She said to me: "Gill, let's put in a request for a big conference, a book, and a survey of who's out there." We would have all our bases covered, right down to the 1000-odd organisations that we eventually wrote to, to answer the requisite 101 questions as you know, we always have!

If you look at the work she did on Urban Planning and the Environment, you would see that Giok Ling was not interested in quick fixes. She 'covered the ground' on urban sustainability – from infrastructure to technology, energy to ethnicity and social cohesion, from 'best practice' to multilateral environmental agreements. The breadth of her interests and depth of her expertise were simply staggering. I am sure that even Yue Choong found it challenging to keep pace with her. I know that an extended discussion of this area of her work will follow so I will not say more here. Suffice it to say that in all that she did, Giok Ling would think through 'The System'. And, she took a developmental outlook to her work. She was dynamic enough go about finding all the evidence she needed to make her case. Finally, she was always charming enough to let you come to your own conclusion ... that she was right!

Another example of this unique quality of looking at 'The System' was a paper she initiated on the need for a National Competitive Research Fund for the Social Sciences. Not content for us to be the 'mendicant monks of policy studies' waiting for enlightened givers like the Lee Foundation to respond to our pleading letters, Giok Ling proposed that we be given a chance to prove our worth alongside other scholars, independent or affiliated with other institutes. The prize would be some real money to conduct deep, multi-year, comparative studies in the social sciences especially those with implications for public policy.

We would not quibble with privileged position that Science, with a capital 'S' and Technology has in research funding. Just imagine with me for a moment: if we had anything between one and ten percent of those billion dollar budgets we could yield really sharp, evidence-driven insights into some of the most interesting questions for Singapore society today: Are Singaporeans just not entrepreneurial? Is filial piety a myth, or is it that we just plain 'can't afford it' anymore? Between absolute control and utter chaos, is there possibly a third and better way to allow for creative and artistic expression to flourish? Do we get a better payoff from early childhood education or latter-year re-skilling and lifelong learning? What's so wrong about living in an unequal society?

It is only after we answer some of these non-Science and Technology questions that we might be in a better position to appropriate all those discoveries and innovations we develop in the fields of the life sciences, nanotechnology, digital and new media, even green technology. We will begin to understand the trade-offs we make when we decide who gets to use these innovations, how they should be used, and why we would want them in the first place. We cannot simply wash our hands and let market forces decide such important issues which can strengthen or weaken our social fabric.

Giok Ling more than understood these issues – lofty though they may be, and she shared these sensibilities with me, fresh as I was. She deigned to mentor a young punk like me, straight out of school, still wet behind the ears. She was warm and encouraging, as she helped me to look at the bigger picture and find the little mosaic pieces that were needed to fill it in.

For all her efforts, NTU recognised Giok Ling's work with a Professorship. She more than found life after IPS!

I enjoyed the meeting of minds between us. Her desire for a better world and her tireless pursuit of this ideal inspired me back in 1996 and I hope, will continue to inspire all of us for a long time to come.

Thank you, Giok Ling.

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