

Tribute to Professor Ooi Giok Ling

Professor Brenda Yeoh

Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
National University of Singapore

Speech

Institute of Policy Studies Forum – A Tribute to Prof Ooi Giok Ling
Orchard Hotel
5 October 2010

It is my privilege to represent the Department of Geography at NUS in paying tribute to Giok Ling.

I don't think even my colleagues at the NUS Geography Department know this, but I first met Giok Ling in the late 1980s when she was working at the HDB and I was a graduate student completing my thesis on colonial Singapore. I am not sure how I got in touch with her in those long lost days when there was no such thing as email, or a handphone or a blackberry, but I distinctively remember showing up at her HDB workplace to meet her in eager hope that she would spare some time for a graduate student trying to come to grips with alternative healthcare systems in colonial Singapore and how these featured in the power negotiations between colonisers and colonised. I hadn't found many people who was interested enough to talk to me about death and disease, cemeteries and burial grounds, sewers and nightsoil bucket systems in an era long past, but Giok Ling was different.

I still remember how kind and encouraging she was, how freely she shared from her own work on Chinese healthcare systems, as well as the way she promptly put into my hands (and mind you I was a total stranger to her at that time) her own PhD thesis on healthcare systems in Malaysia which she had completed in 1982 at ANU. I received help from a number of scholars in my PhD research but Giok Ling stands out in my mind as someone who was just happy to do all she could to help nudge a junior scholar along.

Etched in my mind then, is the indelible picture of Giok Ling as one of my early mentors, and years later, when we became colleagues at the Department of Geography in NUS (Giok Ling held an Adjunct Associate Professor position from January 1999 to December 2003 in the Department), that easy, happy relationship simply continued.

Together with my former colleague Peggy Teo, Giok Ling and I took on the challenge of designing and teaching a huge 450-strong Singapore Studies module called Changing Landscapes of Singapore – Peggy looked at issues of population and the elderly, I covered

heritage issues and immigration concerns, and Giok Ling tackled her pet loves of the environment and urban planning.

It was not an easy module to teach as the students came from different Faculties across campus, but we were united in our belief that understanding something of the way different kinds of landscapes have changed in Singapore and some of the underlying tensions and contestations was important to students' broad-based knowledge of the place they call home. Giok Ling was a stalwart on the module and believed not only in imparting head knowledge but engaging students to discover something new and meaningful in thinking about taken-for-granted everyday landscapes.

Such was the passion that we had for the module that we actually co-wrote an easy-to-digest textbook distilling our collective thoughts on different aspects of Singapore's landscapes in the hope that more students will be encouraged to see the kaleidoscopic landscape through variegated but analytical lenses. I am so glad that we persevered and got the book published, for looking at my copy on my bookshelf will always remind me of our collaborations as fellow teachers and friends.

But I must not just ramble on about my relationship with Giok Ling; in the Geography Department, Giok Ling holds a very dear place in the hearts of many, and I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of their thoughts:

TC Chang

"Giok Ling gamely took on my first year Geography class comprising over 440 students. She asked to grade their essays and I was more than glad to have her help out. She showed such keen interest in the students' work and great enthusiasm in providing feedback. I also learnt a lot from her, seeing her gentle and sensitive demeanor towards the students. In more ways than one, she models for us what a humanitarian educator should be – one who is concerned about the person being taught as much as what is being taught and how it is being taught. On a personal level, Giok Ling was also always exuberant – she was never without a cheery smile and a twinkle in her eyes. She enjoyed life and everything Geography had to offer; and she offered back to Geography everything she had. We are all richer because of her!"

Peggy Teo

"It was wonderful to work with her as she was always keen to be "on the ground". She was happy spending hours in the field understanding the people who constituted her research project. She was objective and kind and the respondents always felt that their views were

heard. Her reports were also detailed while covering all the material necessary for the project. As a teacher, she was favoured by the students for her fairness and her kindness towards them. Although she had many pressing time commitments, she was always available to the students.”

Shirlena Huang

“As a colleague, Giok Ling was warm and encouraging, and I was struck by her cheerful smile and great generosity of spirit for us as younger colleagues. However, it is on a personal level that I will remember her best. In the last few years, we shared emails about cancer treatment and its challenges. She was always positive and upbeat, refusing to let it beat her. I feel very privileged to have served with her on an MOE syllabus review committee in 2008 & 2009, even while she was undergoing yet more treatment. As I was driving her home after one of those meetings just a couple of months before she passed away, I gently chided her for not taking more time off to rest. But work was clearly one of her great passions and a key motivation behind her tireless energy and she talked about papers she was writing and overseas conferences she had attended and hoped to attend once she was better. She also shared about how she was determined to fight the cancer to the end because she wanted to be around for her husband and especially her two sons. There was no hint of bitterness or resentment in her voice, just determination, optimism and great resolve. That is the Giok Ling I will remember with utmost admiration and respect: a professional to the end, a loving wife and mother, and someone who looked at life for its rich possibilities and promise.”

There is really no need for me to come to a conclusion, indeed I cannot, for remembering Giok Ling, and the kind, warm, cheerful, encouraging, strong and courageous person that she was does not fit into any final words or definite conclusion.

But, for me at least, remembering her will remind me – in good times and in bad times – to try to be kinder, warmer, stronger and more courageous in the time I have on earth.
