

Cities and Sustainability - A discussion of Prof Ooi Giok Ling's work and ideas

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Speech

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Assoc Prof Ho Peng Kee, Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Home Affairs

Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Director, Institute of Policy Studies

Dr Kog Yue Choong and family,

Distinguished Guests

Colleagues and friends of the late Professor Ooi Giok Ling

Good afternoon

This panel discussion brings together people that the late Professor Ooi Giok Ling has worked with in the fields of Urban Geography, Cultural Geography, to policy research on Housing and on Civil Society, to Environmental Sustainability and Cities to discuss the work and ideas in these areas.

If you were to trace Prof Ooi's illustrious academic career through her research publications, you will find that she has engaged with many fields in Geography and the Social Sciences. Following her doctoral work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, her publications were mainly on public housing in Singapore. However, there were already a good range of publications on environment, conservation, and ethnic relations. This diversity in academic engagement was clearly seen throughout her career. By the mid 2000s, she has already established an international reputation and was serving on many committees and councils for organizations like the United Nations. In 2005, she led a team of Geographers in formalizing the organization Southeast Asian Geography Association into a legal entity. Prof Ooi advanced her writing in the area of environmental sustainability work and responded to an increasing global awareness on the issue of climate change by 2005. By 2007, I remember her

constantly talking about the idea of livable cities. In 2007, Dr. Ooi Giok Ling was installed as a Full Professor of Geography at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University.

While this panel discussion is part of our way of remembering Professor Ooi and her work, we also hope to establish new connections and networks to continue the ideas that she has planted. To that end, this panel will first explore her early ideas and works by a fellow urban geographer. Associate Professor Wong Tai Chee will outline Prof Ooi's work in the areas of urban geography and housing from the time she worked at the Housing Development Board to the time she became a colleague at the National Institute of Education, NTU.

Assoc Prof Tan Ern Ser who is a Faculty Associate with IPS will share with us his experiences collaborating with Prof Ooi on, and the ideas generated from policy research, mainly on the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports projects and the Housing Development Board projects.

Assoc Prof Victor Savage who was a colleague with Prof Ooi when she was an adjunct faculty at the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore will speak on an overview of Giok Ling academic contributions from a personal vantage perspective.

Assoc Prof Phua Kai Hong is Associate Professor of Health Policy & Management at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. Prof Phua knew Giok Ling from her first day at IPS and will be speaking about Giok Ling's work when she was at the University of Malaya and her more recent policy work on health, environment and housing issues – all pertinent issues of urban sustainable living.

Finally, I will be sharing my experiences working with Prof Ooi. She was a colleague, a friend and my mentor. Through her connections, I grew slowly and steadily in academia and it was with her encouragement that I have done some very meaningful work on cities and climate change.

After the sharing by the four panelists, we will then open the discussion to the floor as there are many other areas of her research that we are unfamiliar with. Perhaps her other collaborators and colleagues who know important aspects of her work will then help us remember the great work she has done. This is the perfect platform for us to connect and continue on the work she has started.

[After the panelists have spoken]

I met Prof Ooi when she joined NIE in 2003/2004. She was a colleague, a friend and my mentor.

We had plenty of opportunity to work together in terms of teaching, fieldwork, writing as well as our work with civil society.

I remember her passion as a geography teacher when she was a co-teacher on an in-service course that I coordinated. It was a content updating course for physical and human geography for secondary school teachers. As the course involved training a few hundred teachers, I was short of tutors for the physical geography component. We all know Giok Ling as a human Geographer. But at this time, she volunteered to take the Physical Geography tutorials and spent quite some time just sitting down with me to ensure that she knows what the tutorial required. She believed and argued that Geographers, whether trained as a human or physical geographer should know the environment that we live in.

After this course, she went on to take the lead to publish a co-authored book with the other lecturers on this course as she felt that we needed to offer a follow up for this course to provide the participants to read deeper about the issues we have raised in the course. This became my first writing collaboration with Prof Ooi. Suffice to say I learnt much from her.

Ooi, G.L., Chatterjea, K., Chang, C.H. & Lim, K.Y.T. (2006). Geographies of a changing world: Global Issues in the early 21st century. Singapore: Pearson

In 2005, we were both lecturers on a fieldtrip for our final year students to Langkawi. We spent 12 days together having every meal together and commuting in a rental car, as we shuttled between sites to supervise our students' work. It was a meaningful experience and she was commenting on how we could share the experience by writing about it. In 2008, we published a chapter on the experience we had conducting geography fieldwork for our students in a book on Education.

Chang, C.H. & Ooi, G.L. (2008). Role of Fieldwork in Humanities and Social Studies Education. In Tan, O. S., McInerney, D. M. , Liem, A. D. & Tan, A. G. (Eds.), Research in Multicultural Education and International Perspectives Series, Volume 7: What the West can learn from the East. Asian Perspectives on the Psychology of Learning and Motivation (pp. 295 - 312). Charlotte: Information Age Publishing. ISBN: 9781593119874 .

She was passionate about Geography Education since the first day I Met her. It was her wish to have a special Geography Education panel for the forthcoming Southeast Asian Geography Association Conference in Hanoi, Vietnam in November this year.

Prof Ooi and I attended the Southeast Asian Geography Association meeting in Khon Kaen, Thailand in 2004 where she was first asked by Professor Goh Kim Chuan to take over the leadership for SEAGA. She dragged me along for the ride and I ended up being her Secretary at SEAGA for the next 6 years. Throughout these 6 years, she had seeded many ideas and the one closest to my heart is the issue on climate change and society. As early as 2005 when we were working on the book on Geographies of a Changing World, she was already very vocal about her views on Climate Change and Society. Through many discussions we have had, it culminated in her proposal to a one day forum on cities and climate change in 2009. She approached the center for livable cities to co-host the event. This was when she was in partial remission from her illness. She worked tirelessly and we put a programme that allowed scholars, policy makers and civil society to discuss climate change mitigation and adaptation issues.

After this event she suggested that both of us could co-author a book on Climate Change and Singapore. We even had a working title, "Climate Change in the Doldrums". She had wanted to comment on the state of climate change mitigation and adaption in Singapore. Unfortunately her health took a turn and we were not able to start that project. But the issues she was concerned with are very much alive today and SEAGA will be featuring a keynote in our forthcoming conference on designing the built environment in the face of climate change, by Dr. Low Pak Sum from UNDP, whom Prof Ooi had worked with and invited for the Climate Change Forum in 2009.

SEAGA will also honour the work of Prof Ooi by having a Ooi Giok Ling lecture for our subsequent conferences. This year, we will also be giving our a paper award to a young PhD/Graduate Student for the conference. We hope that Prof Ooi's spirit and passion for Geography will continue and benefit the community.

I have learnt much from Prof Ooi. Through her I have met many people doing similar work in my fields. I learnt writing with her, teaching with her and even just chatting with her over lunch. I would like to take this opportunity to say "Thank you Giok Ling."
