

Tribute to the late Ooi Giok Ling

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It's hard to believe that one year has passed since Giok Ling left us. However, there is no doubt that her academic works remain important, relevant, and influential. Some of which, I believe, were published posthumously or in the several months before her passing. More importantly, we all have fond memories of her, and in many of us, we have constructed a memorial for her in our hearts.

I came to know Giok Ling sometime in 1989. She was then a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, while I had just returned from my graduate studies to teach at the Department of Sociology, NUS. At that time, I was one of two persons roped in by IPS to conduct a survey relating to national identity, ethnic relations, and citizenship, a project commissioned by MCYS. Giok Ling was the IPS staff overseeing the project.

My impression of her was all positive. She was a conscientious, cool and more than a competent coordinator, possessing the 3 C's that matter most in project management. Despite the difficulties encountered in running a survey, such as recruiting and training of interviewers, Giok Ling managed to pull it off, and we were able to produce a well publicized study on national loyalty in Singapore. Unfortunately, for reasons which I did not have much control over, nor quite understood, she was not given sufficient credit for this study. Despite this, she remained friendly, poised, and dignified, harboring no negative vibes towards us.

It was this attitude of hers that allowed me to continue collaborating with her on several more commissioned surveys on national loyalty, rootedness, and race relations in Singapore over the next two decades. I also worked with her on social indicators projects on political participation and public perception of national issues.

In all of these projects, Giok Ling had proven herself to be more than a fantastic team-player. In fact, she was instrumental in moving most of these projects ahead, helping us to meet difficult

deadlines, without sacrificing on quality, and without any attempt to claim all the credit. I also admired her people skill. She was able to put forth her own views, and stood her grounds, without making anyone feel defensive and inadequate. She was certainly non-threatening. Above all, she was a very generous person, and I was, and still am, a beneficiary of her generosity.

During the last several years, we were co-consultants to the HDB's research department. Our job was to critique the research projects run by the department, as well as mentor its research staff. This involves meeting with the HDB staff on a monthly basis. We all enjoyed the meetings tremendously. These sessions had a friendly, collegial air to them, to a large extent because we had in Giok Ling a confident, secure scholar with an empathy for young researchers. We all learned a lot from one another because people dared to take risks with their suggestions in a non-competitive environment. I must say that in those HDB meetings, I discovered what it was like to work in a nurturing environment where we can all take risks and grow. And for this, I have Giok Ling to thank.

Earlier I mentioned that I was a beneficiary of Giok Ling's generosity. Honestly, I did not have much opportunity to repay her kindness, except in a small way. Here was how. After most of those meetings at HDB, I would give her a ride home. This was certainly not a chore, as I enjoyed the time of simple fellowship and friendship often lacking in academia.

Even though giving her a ride was no big deal, Giok Ling did not take it for granted. In the last six months of her life, when she was still able to attend HDB meetings, she would tell me in the car that she would like to buy me lunch. My reply to her was this: I just want to see you well. She did not reply. I guess she knew her own condition. From July to October 2009, she was unable to attend any more HDB meetings. Her seat at the meeting was left vacant. Deep in our hearts, we really wished that a person like Giok Ling could have been spared such a physical affliction.

Sadly, Giok Ling is no longer with us. Now whenever I drive home after a HDB meeting, I often recall the privilege I have had of being able to spend time with such a wonderful person. Whenever I pass by Coronation Road, I would almost automatically stare at the empty seat next to mine and the spot near Hwa Chong Institution where I used to drop her off.

Giok Ling is a good friend, and a wonderful colleague, collaborator and mentor. I do not know much about her work in geography and urban studies, but I would certainly credit her for being

one of the pioneers of survey research on national loyalty, national pride, rootedness, race relations and political participation in Singapore. It is important to mention this, because there was a time when research on such topics was restricted to newspaper clippings and impressionistic, anecdotal data. Her handiworks can be found in many of the questionnaire items we used, and her insightful analyses are still cited. She wrote well and fast too, accounting for her high productivity and presence in several fields.

There is a lot more I can say about Giok Ling, but allow me to end here. I am not by nature a sentimental person, but maybe I am with respect to Giok Ling. Honestly, how can one not think fondly of Giok Ling. I believe this is also how we ourselves would like to be remembered. Thank you all, and God bless.
