

# Remembering Ooi Giok Ling

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### 1. My Academic Relationship

Though we never engaged in any joint publications per se either as Journal co-authors or book co-editors or writers, both Giok Ling and myself have been engaging in academic dialogue, conference participation and publication exchanges for 30 years.

I first met her in a serious academic endeavour in 1989 in Kenson Kwok's salubrious home. Both Giok Ling and Kenson were editors of the special edition on "Singapore" for the Filipino Journal, *Solidarity* which appeared in 1991. We met on two occasions to discuss the "Singapore" issue and my article contribution. The theme of the issue was the "built environment" and Kenson and Giok Ling were trying to situate Singapore's identity within its 'built environment', a product of planning and policy making. I was glad to write my article "Singapore's Garden City: Reality, Symbol, Ideal" along those lines which featured well in future discussions on Singapore's Garden City. It was my first serious Journal article for a special issue and I was thrilled.

Fast forward in 2008, and I participated in two academic events that Giok Ling invited me. The first was the NIE conference on the Humanities for school teachers where I presented my views on the humanities and that now appears in some NIE web-site. The other conference 'event' would be Giok Ling's last academic project; she and Belinda Yuen edited a book on *World Cities*, where I contributed, yet another chapter. This book arose from the Cities Conference, "Livable and Vibrant Cities" in 2008 and took about 2 years to finally get published in 2010. This unfortunately was Giok Ling's last publication that she saw through. In a way, the book, *World Cities* sums up her long academic engagement with cities and urban studies -- and the book

could have been a tribute to her tireless and engaging work in urban issues and the Singapore case study.

## 2. *Giok Ling's Academic Contributions*

How could I sum up and do justice to Giok Ling's prodigious academic contributions over the last 25 years. In my own view I would nail it down to four major areas: the urban agenda; Singapore studies; environmental issues and her pragmatic, realistic approach to social and cultural urban issues.

### A. *The Urban Agenda*

Giok Ling was consistently a dedicated scholar of urban studies -- nearly all her writings were focused on urban issues and cities. Despite being a geographer I cannot say that her urban interrogations were purely geographical interventions. She began with the proverbial spatial urban issues that geographers' are known for but over the years she dabbled and interrogated in more than geographical 'spatial' perspectives. Over the years she adopted a more environmental holistic view of cities. She looked at cities as 'built' entities in themselves and then as part of a larger network and connection with other environments and cities.

At one level, Giok Ling's urban research, bordered on sociological interrogations arising from her varied portfolios over the years resulting from her many contract engagements with government agencies and statutory boards. Arising from her stint with the HDB, one study was investigating racial and ethnic issues in urban Singapore -- she was curious about the intra-urban ethnic and religious relationships. When she was seconded to the Home Ministry she worked on issues dealing with sociological underpinnings in crime in varied urban settings.

Giok Ling's urban focus seemed to dwell at various times on three perspectives:

a) The role of cities as catalyst of development -- here she found Singapore a really apt example. Cities were "strategic nodes" in the global economic flows. The city was for Giok Ling a twin and dialectical challenge in the cultural role it also played. On the one hand, she hailed the city as both "evil" and yet the place of numerous religious leaders; on the other hand, the city was the site of "creative forces" and also the liberator of myths, superstitions, ignorance and isolation". The city was also the conveyor of information, freedom and knowledge (Ooi, 1995:2).

b) She saw sustainable cities as an endorsement of livable cities, providing “dividends” in the emotional well-being, happiness and health for its inhabitants. The livability of cities was essentially providing creature comforts, environmental goods and citizen’s well being which to a large extent was grounded in her many expositions of the “built” environment -- this was best articulated in her edited book, *City & the State: Singapore’s Built Environment Revisited* and

c) Over the years she commented more on the governmentality issues of cities and urban spaces -- these reflected her years of commission work with different government-type commissions as well as her long stint with IPS (The Institute of Policy Studies). She was consistent in her many writings about the need to good governance in urban management -- her focus was always on political will, professional planning, political management of bottom-up participation, accountability and infrastructural development and maintenance (Ooi, 2010:304–305).

In short Giok Ling was not only an urbanologist, she was very much a child of the city, someone who believed explicitly in the importance of the city as social and cultural changer, the fountainhead of creativity and innovation, and the built environment locus for human welfare and well being. Despite her balanced academic expressions, she was clearly and consistently passionate about the importance of the city in national development and its ability to offer a quality of living for people in the developing world. In one of her uncharacteristic self authored books, *Future of Space*, Giok Ling comes back to her geographical spatial roots and her critical evaluation of the value of urban planning (Ooi, 2004). This book marks a synthesis of her two decades of research on urban issues in a Singapore context and it probably represents the best overview of Singapore’s planning processes.

### *B. The Singapore Interest and Perspective*

If there was a Singapore studies programme, Giok Ling would probably fit the bill heading it or being a major contributor to research output. While she actually came from Malaysia, you would never have guessed her national roots because she came across in research as a dedicated Singapore specialist – her writings over the last 2 decades were almost entirely about Singapore. Part of this Singapore academic obsession might have stemmed from her long association in IPS (The Institute of Policy Studies) which remained a Singapore think tank and which focused much of its research on Singapore policy issues and challenges. As former head of the Geography Department, I hired Giok Ling to co-teach our Singapore Studies module:

Changing Landscapes of Singapore with an all female cast of Singapore experts -- Peggy Teo and Brenda Yeoh. That module was popular with students and reflected no doubt the heavy weights in Singapore knowledge. Eventually a wonderful book on Singapore's changing landscapes were written by the women power group -- probably had a feminist spin on it as well!

Given her Malaysian upbringing and her Australian tertiary education, Giok Ling had indeed a unique academic relationship with her new found home. Her research in some ways reflected a 'fresh perspective' to everything Singapore; she could view things more objectively as an 'outsider'; indeed her lack of familiarization of Singapore's historical processes and society turned her early research writings as a way of educating herself about Singapore and its changing landscapes. She had no specific hearths, no school ties and no places of endearment -- Singapore in her writings was less about places than about a holistic portrayal of a city-state undergoing changes internally to its own national voices of development and adapting rapidly to an ever changing turbulent global environment. She saw Singapore as a global city of variegated cultures she learnt to embrace rather than through a prism of familiar sectoral engagements of personal experience.

Though she always had policy issues in her articles, she was politically astute not to confront and challenge political boundaries -- and her writing though analytical and probing were never controversial and politically sensitive. She remained politically correct and her criticisms of administration and government were always subtle and indirect. Perhaps her knowledge of what was happening across the causeway gave her reason to see issues in a wider perspective -- after all both Singapore and Malaysia share similar social and cultural landscapes yet with different forms of governance and outcomes. Unlike many Malaysians who either portray their national patriotism to Malaysia or betray their disgust with their country's changing political scenarios, in all my engagements with Giok Ling over the years, I never received from her any strong views about Malaysia either way. Though Malaysia was her country of her childhood she rarely recalled events of her past in public or even personally.

For many academics, Singapore's success story in development has in some ways been the academic fodder for our own academic interventions; and Giok Ling capitalized on this 'unique' Singapore development in many of her writings. She discussed Singapore's changing landscapes and policies through a prism of many intersecting perspectives -- social, economic, cultural, political and environmental. Hence, using Singapore as empirical evidence, she

became a composite social scientist intersecting different vantage points from political science to sociology, geography to economics.

Given Singapore's legendary public housing HDB programmes, it is not surprising that much of Giok Ling's 'urban' perspectives dealt with public housing issues. In a 1993 IPS publication edited by herself, Sharon Siddique and Soh Kay Cheng, focus was given to the "management of ethnic relations in public housing estates". Giok Ling's article in this edited monograph had to do with the discussion of the government's policy to use the HDB flats in creating ethnic mixes and integration in blocks. In some ways, her belief in urban planning and ethnic engineering underscored her quasi-environmental deterministic notions which are reflected in Singapore's leadership.

In a way Singapore's success story allowed many academics like Giok Ling to explore its many dimensions -- it was a story worth documenting, analyzing and reflecting on. For some it might have been a unique case study and yet for others, it was an existential example of what cities can do in developmental processes. In short Singapore's success was the example of a growing legion of other developing countries seeking to emulate its policies and programmes. Ironically, Singapore success as Minister Mentor notes is also a product of 'emulation' rather than comparative economic policies. The MM notes that 70 % of all Singapore's policies and programmes were copied from other cities, governments, organizations and countries. The culmination of this 'model Singapore' was best exemplified in Giok Ling's 2-volume edited publication.

Despite being a citizen of an adopted country, Giok Ling embraced Singapore with admiration and cautious reflection. Over the years she seemed torn between how Singapore's governance was best translated, represented and emulated; on the one hand she demonstrated strong advocacy for top down professional planning, policy making, rule creating, institution-building and legal enforcements and yet on the other side her writings demonstrated forays into the need for greater citizen democracy, grassroots participation, engaging civic groups and social understanding, the 'soft infrastructure' of cities (Ooi, 2010:22).

### C. *Environmental Issues*

Given her geographical training and interest, Giok Ling also had a rather strong interest in urban environmental issues which grew over the years especially as an academic – her attention

however was on the 'brown' rather than the 'green' issues. Her later books and articles demonstrated her growing interest in urban environmental management and sustainability issues -- best summed up in edited book: *Sustainability and Cities: concept and assessment* (2005) and *World Cities* (2010). Her interest in environment seemed to stem from the global United Nations interests on environment, Agenda 21 that dominated development issues in the mid-1990s.

With her strong urban bias, Giok Ling's ideas on environment were less about 'green' issues in biodiversity, saving nature, forest and marine conservation or preserving ecosystems. Her definition of environment was positively about built urban environments and hence her concerns were about urban populations, incomes, diets, housing, rapid urbanization and industrialization and pollution. The urban environmental challenge was for her a major 'Third World' urban problem of winning a war against homelessness, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, infant mortality, and malnutrition. These were real urban problems. She saw the positive aspects of cities as favourable sites for change rather than as 'unfavourable' places of pollution (Ooi, 1995:3). The Singapore story was for her the quintessential development state which held the key to successful urban development and change for the developing world (Ooi, 1995:3-4). The key to Singapore environmental success story was "management" which was often translated as policies, planning and programmes.

Giok Ling seemed optimistic about the realization of urban sustainability in most of her writings. She did not think that urbanization would result in "unsustainable environments" (Ooi, 2010:25). Her optimism in urban sustainability was once again embedded in her beliefs of creating and maintaining good urban infrastructure – public transport, water, waste, land use, pollution controls and energy. She saw urban sustainability infrastructural systems as an outcome of effective planning, good governance, new technologies, and environmental management (Ooi, 2010). What she left aside was the external equation of city sustainability, the urban creation of ecological footprints and the external ecosystem support mechanisms for food, water and natural resources.

#### *D. The Realist, Pragmatic, Empirical Approach*

In her long research agenda over the decades, you never get the idea that Giok Ling was an ideologue, engaged with ideas, with changing academic concepts, with the academic fetish for isms. Giok Ling's academic work was basically what academics might call "grounded theory" --

she had her feet and mind on the ground with existential social and political issues and not in airy fairy isms, ideas and concepts. This does not mean Giok Ling operated in a conceptual and academic vacuum -- far from it. Her articles always carried repeatedly well know scholars and pertinent contributors to urban issues: Manuel Castells, J. Friedmann, David Harvey, Jane Jacobs, Saskia Sassen. She clearly wanted academic voices to be heard but not for the sake of winning an academic argument.

Giok Ling never allowed isms and conceptual frameworks to dominate her writings. Her work was not about carrying an academic argument as a dedicated piece of sound scholarship within the reigning academic debate of the time. Reading any of her work, you never get any sense of her trying to frame her views within a rigid academic conceptual framework. Her articles and books dealt less with trying to explore concepts and academic isms than with trying to understand the grassroots issues and quotidian processes that urban development entails, that Singaporeans relate to in their built environments for work, play and living, and that governments confront in their management of urban challenges. Her scholarship was all about people in given urban environments, it was always decisively about reality and it was always embedded in empirical case studies -- essentially Singapore's city, its institutions, its government and bureaucrats, and its peoples. She allowed the Singapore landscape and society to speak directly rather than impose a conceptual architecture to make issues look academic. In many ways, Giok Ling's writing did not address a professional audience in geography or the social sciences hence her publication have less to do with IR Journal contributions though in her later years her academic voice grew louder. Her academic contributions were targeted for the Singapore and regional audiences in the numerous edited books and book articles she penned. Her writings thus addressed local issues, challenges and policies. Her voice resonates within Singapore and regional circles and less with peers in geography and the social sciences.

What I particularly liked about Giok Ling's writings was that she always gave equal weight to local scholars and academics from the developing world. Hence her references always carried the contributions of Singaporean academics, government officials and publications, and works from other non Anglo-American realms. She was thus willing to let local and 'Third World' voices speak in the same arena as the doyens of western thought.

Giok Ling was no idealist; she was indeed very much grounded in the daily interconnections of urban change and development which Singapore so richly exemplified. She was in some ways

a spokesperson for professionals and policy makers involved in Singapore's urban development: her book on the built environment was clearly trying to identify how practicing professionals and policy-makers "construct" the urban community's needs. She saw the biggest challenge in the negotiation of officialdom and government leadership with the political participation of citizenry (the re-politicization of the citizenry) in meeting the challenges of urban development (Ooi, 1997:5-6). In many ways she was an advocate for urban planning in shaping urban outcomes and delivering urban and environmental goods. She saw urban policy makers as instrumental and abetting the process of building a modern city-state which could "adequately support the government's plans for social and economic development and growth". In her early years she clearly supported and registered personal support for top down government initiatives in planning and policy framing -- she saw that the government in Singapore was able to get things done and she seemed less apologetic about such planned development.

In her last academic piece on the 2008 World Cities Summit, she was convinced urban sustainability was anchored in the importance of "good governance" a la the Singapore political menu -- what she defined as based on "the values of merit, competence, transparency, integrity, accountability and equity" (Ooi, 2010:13). Using the UNDP and the World Bank's policy prescriptions and debate in the World Cities Summit, Giok Ling worked an article targeted at the developing world -- it was an article which for her was uncharacteristically global in scope but using Singapore's urban environmental experiences as benchmarks. Her pet themes of faith in city planning, urban design, and bottom-up processes of meeting citizens' needs were once again resurrected (Ooi, 2010:25).

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