

# Remembering Giok Ling

## Associate Professor Phua Kai Hong

Health Policy and Management

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

Speech

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I am so pleased that we are having this memorial forum to pay tribute to our dear friend and colleague. Coming as the last speaker on this panel, perhaps I can add some footnotes or a preface to all that have been said about Giok Ling and her great contributions. But I can definitely share more about her origins and academic roots in Malaysia and provide some extra insights into her contributions in the health field. I know Giok Ling from day one when she first joined IPS as a Research Fellow as I was already the first Adjunct Fellow appointed in 1988. We got along well because she was then a fellow Malaysian “refugee” (nowadays, our types are called “foreign talent”) and we had many mutual friends including her beloved husband, Dr Kog Yue Choong, since we all share many common interests in public affairs. I got to know Yue Choong much better later on and we served together on NUS and IPS committees, including the 2002 IPS Forum on Economic Restructuring (IFER) Working Group on the Promotion of Singapore’s Professional Services Overseas, which I chaired as a Group Leader, with Yue Choon representing the engineering profession.

Giok Ling’s interest in health matters started early in her student days. Even though her concentration was geography, she was able to straddle many socio-cultural, socio-economic and social policy aspects from her broad social science orientation in health-related topics. In 1977, she wrote a M.A. thesis at the Faculty of Arts & Social Science, University of Malaya (Fakulti Sastera dan Social Sains, Universiti Malaya), *Geography of Socio-Economic Health In Taiping Urban Area* (her hometown). In 1978, she published an edited version, *The Geography of Socio-Economic Health and Distress in Northwestern Peninsular Malaysia*, SEAPRAP, Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore. She went on to do further research studies on the geography of Chinese traditional medicine in Malaysia, completing in

1982 a PhD thesis – *Conservation-Dissolution: A Case Study of Chinese Medicine in Peninsular Malaysia* at the Australian National University.

After obtaining her doctorate from the ANU, she worked for a few years at the University of Malaya's Social Obstetrics and Gynaecological Unit at the Faculty of Medicine. I know personally her previous head of department, Prof Khairuddin Yusof. Prof Khairuddin ran a world-renowned community development project targeted at improving the health of the squatter settlements in Kuala Lumpur called Sang Kancil. Giok Ling was involved in the National Child Care Survey conducted in 1982 by the University of Malaya covering 5 states in West Malaysia and 2 cities in East Malaysia, with financial assistance from UNICEF (Reference: K Yusof, YL Wong, GL Ooi and F Hamid-Don, Child Care Services in Malaysia: An Overview, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health* 1987 1(3): 11-16). She also presented a paper, Child care centers and pre-school education at the Seminar on Education on Education and Development, 18-22 Nov 1983, Penang. A few years later, her team published a related joint article by Low Wah Yun, Ooi Giok Ling and Khairuddin Yusof, Community-based use of IQ test with Sang Kancil pre-school children, *Malaysian Journal of Reproductive Health*, 1986 4(2): 97-103.

When Giok Ling moved down to work in Singapore in 1983, joining the research unit of the Housing and Development Board (HDB), she was soon spotted by Dr Aline Wong (later a Minister of State for Health and Education) and together they published a chapter - Wong A and Ooi GL, Spatial Reorganization, in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, KS Sandhu and P Wheatly (eds), Institute of South East Asian Studies, 1989. After she joined the IPS from 1989 onwards, Giok Ling began to build a solid reputation working on Singapore's housing policies. I remember that in 1990, she published the IPS Occasional Paper No. 4, *Town Councils in Singapore: Self-Determination for Public Housing Estates*, Times Academic Press, Singapore, just a few months ahead of my own IPS Occasional Paper No. 5, *Privatization and Restructuring of Health Services in Singapore*.

Around 2000, Giok Ling was invited by her old boss, Prof Khairuddin Yusof, to write the overview chapter for a book edited by him and his team Public Health in Asia-Pacific: Overview of Changes, Trends and Challenges, in *Issues and Challenges of Public Health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, K Yusof, WY Low, SN Zulkifli and YL Wong (eds), New Millenium Series, University of Malaya Press (undated circa 2000). I was also the contributor of a chapter in it - KH Phua, A Seow and HP Lee, Issues and Challenges of Public Health in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Singapore. In her overview, Giok Ling placed very strong emphasis on the impact of development and change

on public health, especially the effects of urbanization on top of other factors of rapid industrialization, international division of labour, women's participation in wage work, poverty and health, rural-urban divide, demographic changes, and public health care infrastructure and programs.

Giok Ling always had a soft spot for health matters, as she included me in many of her research projects and activities whenever there was a health component. I distinctly remember the excellent conference on civil society that she organized with Gillian Koh, when I was persuaded to present a paper on health and welfare issues, which was published as a book chapter - Phua KH, Social Welfare and Health Care, in *State-Society Relations in Singapore*, Gillian Koh and Ooi Giok Ling (eds), 2000. In the same year, she also persuaded me to share my earlier bibliographic materials on ageing in Singapore prepared in 1990 for the Gerontological Society, to be updated into an *Annotated Bibliography on Ageing and the Elderly*, Grace Wong Khie Mie, Ooi Giok Ling & Phua Kai Hong, Singapore University Press, 2000.

Over the last few years, she maintained her interests in health and co-authored with me two final papers - SARS in urban institutions, and urbanization and slum formation. The first joint paper was published as SARS in Singapore – Challenges of a Global Health Threat to Local Institutions, *Natural Hazards*, 2008. This study presented the management of a hazard by local institutions and its potential to spread at the national and local spatial scales. The second paper came about when I had recommended her to serve in the Knowledge Network on Urban Settings for the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health in 2006, and to write the Singapore case-study on our successful public housing programme. We ended up as contributing writers in an international team responsible for *Our Cities, Our Health, Our Future; Acting on Social Determinants for Health Equity in Urban Settings*, Report to the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health from the Knowledge Network on Urban Settings, WHO Centre for Health Development, Kobe, Japan, 2008. An edited version of our joint Thematic Paper 13 was also published as GL Ooi and KH Phua, Urbanization and Slum Formation, *Journal of Urban Health*, 84(1): 127-134, 2007, in a special WHO-commissioned supplement together with all 15 papers produced by the Knowledge Network on Urban Settings. This was one of our proudest achievements, of writing the Singapore case study of successful public housing that was show-cased in the report to the influential WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health, chaired by Sir Michael Marmot.

Yue Choong had mentioned to me that Giok Ling had been invited and was looking forward to attend a conference held in Bellagio, Italy associated with the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Unfortunately, she did not make it although I was fortunate enough to have visited Bellagio twice, with the last time earlier this year for a meeting of project grantees at the lovely Rockefeller Center. How I wish I could drink a glass of Prosecco (the Italian Champagne) to Giok Ling.

With Giok Ling's passing, I have lost more than an academic colleague in public health and public policy. As I reflect on our past collaborative work, I realize how much more productive she had really made me, gently pushing and cajoling me towards greater output, higher quality and deeper public service. Although I never had the chance to thank her personally, it is not too late for me to take this opportunity to thank her publicly for her intellectually stimulating and warm friendship over the years.

I remember her closing remarks at the IPS civil society conference when she proclaimed in this very hall - "Viva la Civil Society"! I would like to do the same to raise a glass and give a toast to Viva la Giok Ling! May her spirit continue to inspire us in our work and in life!

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