

Ann Elizabeth Wee, 'founding mother' of social work in Singapore, dies aged 93

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SINGAPORE: Mrs Ann Elizabeth Wee, often described as the founding mother of social work in Singapore, died on Wednesday (Dec 11), aged 93.

Tributes have flooded in for Mrs Wee, who for more than six decades championed social work and advocated for those less fortunate.

Described as an “inspiration to social workers and women everywhere” by the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame, Mrs Wee - the longest-serving head of the Department of Social Work at the National University of Singapore (NUS) - was also recognised for her work with children and young people.

“Deeply saddened to hear about the passing of Mrs Ann Elizabeth Wee. She is known as the founding mother of social work in Singapore,” Education Minister Ong Ye Kung wrote in a Facebook post on Wednesday.

“Mrs Wee has elevated social work in the public eye. We are ever grateful to her for her contributions, and all the lives she has touched.”

Mrs Wee, who was an Associate Professional Fellow at the NUS Social Work Department, was described as a “doyen of the social work community” and a “national treasure” by the Institute of Policy Studies in its tribute on Facebook.

“She never spoke of, but for, the disadvantaged, performing the role of a participant-observer in their affairs even as she suggested, with scholarly precision and political realism, how policies and programmes could help them concretely,” the institute wrote.

“Her concerns clearly were a reflection of her deep commitment to her vocation as a social worker which began in post-war Singapore. Those concerns were well taken and an inspiration to us to think harder about a range of social, economic, labour and healthcare policies in our country.”

The Singapore Women's Hall of Fame, which inducted Mrs Wee into its ranks in 2014, said: “Ann offered help to women who had been abandoned or abused by their spouses and strove to shape a better education system for social work.”

THE FOUNDING MOTHER OF SOCIAL WORK

Born on Aug 19, 1926, in Corbridge, the United Kingdom, Mrs Wee arrived in Singapore in 1950 to be reunited with her fiancé, lawyer Harry Lee Wee. They had met at Cambridge University during her studies.

According to an obituary by NUS, Mrs Wee spent four years as a teacher at the Methodist Girls' School before joining the Social Welfare Department at the university.

To better communicate with families in Singapore, Mrs Wee learnt Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien and other dialects and languages.

In 1957, she started teaching full-time at the university and took over headship in 1967 - a role she would serve until her retirement in 1986.

“As the department’s longest-serving head, Mrs Wee was the driving force behind the university’s decision to introduce a full-fledged honours degree programme, paving the way for social workers to be recognised as professionals, enjoy better career prospects, and gain access to policymaking,” NUS wrote in her obituary.

But beyond her work as an educator, Mrs Wee spent time working for troubled families. She spent nearly four decades from 1970 on the advisory panel to the Juvenile Court (now Youth Court).

Besides being an advisor on women’s issue with the Ministry of Social Affairs, she was well known among the women in the squatter areas of Singapore in post-war Singapore.

“Her clients had mostly been abandoned or abused by their husbands. Until the Women’s Charter became law in 1961, women had few rights,” the Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame wrote.

“Marriages were mostly customary, bigamy was commonplace, and there was no such thing as a divorce decreed by a law court.

“She did all she could to assist them, even occasionally roping in her husband to help a woman secure maintenance.”

In Mrs Wee’s own words in an animation video series by the National Integration Council about the contributions of foreign-born individuals to Singapore, she said: “More than anything, I wanted to make the world a better place.”

During the six decades in public service, Mrs Wee was bestowed the Public Service Star in 1972 and the Public Service Star (Bar) in 2004.

She was recognised with the Meritorious Service Medal in 2010 and the NUSS Distinguished Lifetime Volunteer Achievement Award in 2012, among the many awards conferred on her.

The Ann Wee NUS Social Work Alumni Award was established in 2014 by NUS in her honour.

In 2017, her memoir *A Tiger Remembers: The Way We Were* in Singapore was published.

The Institute of Policy Studies wrote: “Her legacy as an educator, her role model as an active senior, and her presence as a true Singaporean who married the heart and head to build a better future for so many - these comforts will far outlast this period of grief at her passing.”

Mrs Wee is survived by two daughters and four grandchildren.