

Tommy Koh: Champion, Optimist, Singaporean

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Given his multi-faceted career as a diplomat, academic and patron of the arts, not to mention his regular contributions to the national newspaper, Prof. Tommy Koh needs little introduction.

What distinguishes him though is his down-to-earth character and his efforts in championing the underdogs and unsung heroes in our society.

In a commentary published in *The Straits Times* on 5 January 2012, Prof. Koh paid tribute to his dentist, tailor and optician, three octogenarians who have been plying their respective trades for over half a century. To him, these consummate professionals are assets to our nation and he calls for a mindset shift to start viewing older workers in a new light.

The same article can be found in the newly published *The Tommy Koh Reader: Favourite Essays and Lectures*. As the title implies, the book is a selection of over 80 essays and speeches that Prof. Koh has written or made over the decades. They cover a broad spectrum of topics, including diplomacy, law, nature, the environment, arts, culture and heritage, demonstrating the breadth and depth of his expertise and interests.

The personal and familial however takes pride of place in the book, with the first section devoted to “Family and Friends”. Besides heartfelt tributes to his parents, Prof. Koh spoke fondly of the remarkable individuals who have made immense contributions to the country, such as the late Deputy Prime Minister S Rajaratnam, the late Chief Minister David Marshall and former President S R Nathan. In “10 Lessons from Dr Goh’s Life”, Prof. Koh expounds the many virtues of the late Dr Goh Keng Swee that are worthy of emulation, with frugality, courage and optimism being some of them.

Optimism is likewise part of Prof Koh’s DNA and his positive outlook is manifested in the essay “10 Stops along a Historical Singapore Trail”. Inspired by a heritage book he helped to launch, Prof. Koh leads the reader on a tour of the Lion City, beginning with Fort Canning, to the Nanyang Memorial Hall, Ford Motor Works and City Hall before ending the journey at “a happy place” — the Botanic Gardens.

Evident in the essay — and in many others — is his love for Singapore. Prof. Koh’s sense of patriotism and embrace of Singapore, warts and all, defines him as a pragmatic idealist.

True to his appreciative nature, Prof. Koh has dedicated the book to all the personal assistants who have worked with him in the various offices he has held.

The Tommy Koh Reader: Favourite Essays and Lectures is available in major bookstores at \$36 (soft cover) and \$78 (hard cover).

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