

A Tribute to Ooi Giok Ling

Professor Tommy Koh

Special Advisor, Institute of Policy Studies

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

Life is a mysterious journey. We do not know why a good woman like Ooi Giok Ling, who still had so much to contribute, as wife, mother, teacher and scholar, was suddenly taken away from us at the age of 57.

When I joined the Institute of Policy Studies, as its Director, in 1990, the Institute was an extremely small family. Apart from the Acting Director, Prof Jon Quah, the other research staff consisted of Dr Ooi Giok Ling, Dr Yap Mui Teng and Ms Tan Teng Lang. The administrative staff consisted of Mabel Chung, Cynthia Lin and Mazlan Mahmood.

Giok Ling had joined IPS in 1989, after six years as a researcher at the Housing and Development Board. Altogether, I had known and worked with her for 16 years. In 2006, she decided to leave IPS to return to her first love, teaching, with the National Institute of Education, at NTU. She was born in Perak and had begun her professional career, teaching at the University of Malaya and the Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Giok Ling was trained in geography, earning a doctorate, from the Australian National University. Her specialisation was in urban geography. However, like many of our best geographers, such as, Kernial Singh Sandhu, Thio Jin Bee, Lee Yong Leng, Lily Kong, Brenda Yeoh, Wong Poh Poh, Victor Savage, et al, Giok Ling's intellectual interests range far and wide. I was amazed at her versatility. She researched and published on state-civil society relations, ethnic relations, Chinese medicine, health care, nature and the environment, and even criminality in Singapore. Giok Ling was a renaissance woman and successfully transcended the artificial boundaries of the disciplines as taught at universities.

Giok Ling's best work was in her core domain of urban geography. Her publications on public housing, urbanisation, public spaces and cities, contained valuable knowledge and insights. They constitute her intellectual legacy to Singapore and to the world.

I have one particularly happy memory of working with Giok Ling. In 1997, on the occasion of Rio+5, the UN General Assembly held a special summit segment. The then Chancellor of

the Federal Republic of Germany, Helmut Kohl, decided to launch an initiative. He enlisted Singapore, South Africa and Brazil as his three partners. I accompanied our then Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, to the meeting in New York. The four partner countries decided that each of them would convene a global conference in an area in which we had best practices to share with the world. Singapore decided to convene a Conference on Model Cities.

IPS and URA were tasked to implement the proposal. Giok Ling and I led the IPS team. Working seamlessly with the URA team, we succeeded in convening an excellent conference at which cities from around the world shared their best practices with one another. The best practices were contained in a two-volume publication, edited by Giok Ling. We also succeeded in persuading UN Habitat to post them on their website.

It is not easy to be a woman in the contemporary world. Giok Ling had to juggle her competing responsibilities as a loving and supportive wife to Kog Yue Choong, a nurturing mother to Tian Ji and Zheng Xi, and a productive and highly respected teacher and scholar, at IPS and at NIE. She seemed to have had inexhaustible energy and succeeded in coping with the many demands on her time and attention. In addition, she was a good mixer and participated actively in the many cultural and intellectual activities of Singapore. She was always calm, pleasant, with a good sense of humour and a warm smile.

I join the Kog family in mourning their loss.
