

Pursuing passion for migrant worker issues

Rhodes scholarship winner plans to delve into subject in her PhD studies at Oxford

Malavika Menon

Harvard graduate Poh Yong Han is the first in her family to go to university, but her parents never pressured her to excel in her studies.

The only child – whose father runs a renovation firm and mum is a housewife – said her parents raised her with a strong work ethic and stressed the importance of humility to her at a young age.

Her grandfather, a retired hawker, and grandmother, a cleaner, also kept her grounded through her years at Raffles Girls' School and Raffles Institution.

Late last month, Ms Poh, 23, received news that she had been awarded the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship to pursue a PhD at Oxford University next year.

The award of the Rhodes Scholarship resumed in Singapore in 2018, after it was suspended here and in several other countries in 2006 due to funding issues.

Former recipients of the scholarship, which was established in 1902, include former US president Bill Clinton and former Australian prime minister Bob Hawke.

Ms Poh, who is now finishing her master's degree in South-east Asian studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS), will continue to pursue her interest in issues affecting migrant workers and refugees at Oxford.

Her interest in those who live on the margins developed after she began her undergraduate studies at Harvard University in the United States.

There, Ms Poh was struck by the challenges faced by immigrants, in

areas such as education and jobs.

"On the one hand, there were international students like me who could further their education in a diverse and safe space, and on the other, there were low-wage migrants on temporary visas and undocumented migrants who struggled daily," she said.

Determined to make a difference, she taught English as a second language to Chinese immigrants in the Greater Boston area, and was a peer-advising fellow for first-year students.

Although initially apprehensive about studying overseas due to financial constraints, Ms Poh was able to secure generous financial aid from Harvard in 2016 to pursue her studies at the Ivy League college.

Campus life was an eye-opener.

"On the one hand, you had extremely wealthy (and mostly white) 'legacy' students and children of billionaires who attended the same elite prep schools; and on the other hand, you also had undocumented students, working-class students, and poorer students who hailed from developing countries and so forth," she recalled.

"I felt very lucky to have had the education I received in Singapore, which prepared me well for the rigours of Harvard.

"However, I also recognise that I was fortunate to have attended schools that received a disproportionate amount of resources, and that our public education, while relatively affordable, is also highly uneven."

Interested in the social issues facing Singapore, she became editor-in-chief of the *Singapore Policy Journal*, a student-run journal at the Harvard Kennedy School,



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MS POH YONG HAN, who has an interest in migrant worker issues and befriended some workers here.

Ms Poh Yong Han was struck by the challenges faced by immigrants during her time as a Harvard undergraduate in the United States.
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which focuses on public policy.

For her senior thesis, she wrote on migrant worker poetry and storytelling communities in Singapore.

After graduating in May this year, Ms Poh decided to look at migrant worker rights and social issues from a Singaporean standpoint, and enrolled at NUS.

Pursuing a PhD, she said, is a chance to dive deep into an issue she is passionate about – protecting migrant rights.

"I want to break this perception of academia as an ivory tower and reach out to people on the ground who are impacted by the policies and decisions taken at a regional or

national level," she said.

Of her interest in pursuing migrant worker issues, she said: "When I came back to Singapore during university breaks, I befriended migrant workers here while doing my field work and got to know some of them personally.

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At Oxford, Ms Poh plans to study immigration policy affecting eco-

nomic migrants and asylum-seeking refugees, as well as transnational migrant brokerage, such as the trend of agents charging migrant workers commission for overseas job opportunities.

On her family's reaction to the happy news, Ms Poh said she had to explain the significance of the scholarship and doctoral studies to her grandparents, who did not know much about Oxford.

"I find their perspective really helpful because they remind me to see beyond prestige and be level-headed in my work."

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At a glance

Established by the will of Cape Colony prime minister and diamond magnate Cecil John Rhodes in 1902, the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship is deemed the oldest international scholarship programme in the world.

It enables students to undertake full-time postgraduate studies at the University of Oxford. Rhodes Scholars have gone on to become prominent political figures, academics, scientists and civil society leaders. Celebrated astronomer Edwin Hubble (1910) and former US president Bill Clinton (1968) are among them.

The award of the Rhodes Scholarship resumed in Singapore in 2018, after it was suspended here and in several other countries in 2006 due to funding issues. Singapore firm APS Asset Management gifted an endowment of £4 million (S\$7.1 million) to reinstate the scholarship.

Notable Singaporeans who were Rhode Scholars include former MP and Cabinet minister Raymond Lim and competitive swimmer Desmond Koh.

Mr Lim was awarded the scholarship in 1984. He entered politics in 2001 and was made a minister of state after being elected. He served as transport minister before leaving politics in 2015.

Mr Koh represented Singapore in 14 events at the 1988, 1992 and 1996 Olympics. He received the scholarship for his PhD degree in 1995.

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