



Professor Tommy Koh receiving his honorary Doctor of Laws degree from National University of Singapore pro-chancellor Po'ad Mattar at a commencement ceremony held at the NUS University Cultural Centre earlier this week. PHOTOS: NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

NUS awards honorary degrees to Tommy Koh, Wang Gungwu



Professor Wang Gungwu receiving his honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Mr Mattar at the commencement ceremony earlier this week.

Nisha Rahim

Veteran university dons Tommy Koh and Wang Gungwu were earlier this week awarded honorary degrees by the National University of Singapore (NUS) for their contributions to their fields and beyond.

Professor Koh was presented with an honorary Doctor of Laws for his contributions and impact on NUS and globally in various areas such as international law, diplomacy, and arts and culture.

He was appointed as emeritus professor at the NUS law faculty in April. He has also been in key roles as a diplomat, including as Singapore's permanent representative to the United Nations between

1968 and 1971, and again from 1974 to 1984.

At a commencement ceremony held at the NUS University Cultural Centre in Kent Ridge Crescent where he received his award, he told the audience of about 200 arts and social sciences graduates how he focused his energy on law, nature and culture.

Prof Koh, 84, said he viewed his work as president of the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1982 as the most important. Over 100 countries signed a treaty that provided a universal framework for the governance of the oceans.

On the environmental front, he recalled how the UN elected him in 1990 to chair the preparatory committee for the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. He said his drafted declaration of principles on environment and development has since become part of international environmental law.

Prof Koh is happy to have played a part in developing Singapore's culture and the arts.

He was the first chairman of the National Arts Council, from 1991 to 1996, and was chairman of the National Heritage Board between 2002 and 2011.

"Thirty years ago, many people criticised Singapore as a cultural desert, and today, Singapore is a cultural oasis, with a very vibrant art scene," he said.

Noting how many people turned to music and books during the circuit breaker in 2020 to survive the isolation, he said: "The truth is we do not survive on rice and roti alone. We also need nourishment for our hearts. Culture and arts provide some of that nourishment."

Also at the ceremony was Professor Wang, 91, who was awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters for his achievements in academia and education. He is an internationally renowned historian known for his scholarship on the history of the Chinese diaspora in South-east Asia.

In his address, he touched on how NUS adapted to the rapid changes over the decades and has become a major centre of learning in the world.

He said: "Two key factors contributed to that ability to keep pace with the best. One was the determination to be actively connected to different parts of the world."

"The other is to master all the skills necessary to respond to new opportunities whenever they are identified. And the university led the way in both these directions."

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CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

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PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH, who is happy to have helped develop Singapore's culture and the arts.