

**CITATION BY PROFESSOR SIMON CHESTERMAN,
VICE PROVOST (EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION) AND DEAN, FACULTY OF LAW AND
NUS COLLEGE**

**PUBLIC ORATOR FOR PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH,
RECIPIENT OF HONORARY DOCTOR OF LAWS**

**NUS COMMENCEMENT 2022, MAIN CEREMONY
WEDNESDAY, 6 JULY 2022, NUS UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE**

Introduction

Professor Tommy Koh has dedicated his professional life to NUS, to Singapore, and to the world.

He epitomises the very best qualities of a practitioner-scholar. Deeply steeped in and committed to education, he was a member of the first cohort of law students at what was then the University of Malaya from 1957 to 1961. The only graduate to be awarded first class honours — an achievement not to be repeated for a decade — he joined the faculty the following year as an assistant lecturer at the renamed University of Singapore. By 1971 he had been awarded tenure and elected Dean. Earlier this year, we had the honour of making him an Emeritus Professor of what is now the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Law — a full sixty years after first joining the University.

Such a career would do many academics proud, and yet it speaks to only a fraction of Tommy's story. For these academic milestones are but one strand of the rich tapestry of his professional life.

NUS

Let me start first with NUS. Though he has been on no-pay leave since 1974, I think it is no exaggeration to say that Tommy has done more for NUS than most of us do even when employed full time.

Tommy has been a source of leadership and guidance, through his stints as Chair of the Faculty of Law's Advisory Board (2003–2011) and Director and Chair of the Institute of Policy Studies (1991–2009), which became part of NUS in 2008. He has served as a member of the Governing Board of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. He was the founding chairman of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum. He also served for over a decade as the Chairman of the Asia Research Institute's International Advisory Panel.

He played a key role in setting up the Centre for International Law and chaired its Governing Board. He has also served for the past decade as Rector of Tembusu College.

All this is in addition to the many other formal and informal ways he has helped NUS, from launching its Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law in 1996, where he remains Co-Chair of the Advisory Committee as well as chairing the Advisory Committee of the Master's in Environmental Management degree, to spearheading initiatives like the naming of a Chair after founding Law Dean Lionel A. Sheridan.

Singapore

Secondly, in addition to those many contributions to NUS, Tommy has also played key roles for Singapore, including as Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1968-1971, 1974-1984), and Ambassador to the United States (1984-1990).

He was founding Chairman of the National Arts Council (1991-1996), Chairman of the National Heritage Board (2002-2011), and founding Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation. He led negotiations on our Free Trade Agreement with the United States.

He also brought his prodigious legal skills to bear in support of Singapore's first case before the International Court of Justice, during the Pedra Branca dispute with Malaysia. He was also Singapore's Agent in another legal dispute with Malaysia over Singapore's land reclamation activities before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

This was also an example of his commitment as a practitioner-scholar. Having won the case, most lawyers would be content to pop a bottle of champagne and toast their victory. Tommy congratulated his team — but then immediately set to work on a book analysing what could be learned from the episode. He also edited a book on the Land Reclamation case.

Even in "retirement", Tommy remains prolific. I counted six books that he has published in just the last three years — and he recently told me he has two more coming out before the end of 2022. A recurrent theme in his work is helping Singaporeans understand their own country and its place in the world, as well as helping the rest of the world understand Singapore. Few have better deserved the title he still holds with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Ambassador-at-Large".

The World

It would not be a fitting tribute to Tommy if I didn't have a third reason for my proposition this morning.

And that is that Tommy has also had a transformative role globally. Signature achievements include his presidency of the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (1981-1982) and chairmanship of the Preparatory Committee for and the Main Committee at the 1992 Earth Summit.

Both are vitally important to our future. The Law of the Sea Convention governs 70 percent of the world's surface. The Earth Summit was a crucial step in advancing environmental awareness and the need for economic development to be ecologically sustainable.

He was the Chairman of the High-Level Task Force that drafted the ASEAN Charter, which came into force in 2008.

Tommy has received too many honours to mention all of them, but four that stand out are: an honorary doctorate of laws from Yale (1984); the Elizabeth Haub Prize for Environmental Law (1996); the UNEP Champion of the Earth Award (2006); and Harvard's Great Negotiator Award (2014).

Conclusion

I could go on.

To many in Singapore and beyond, Tommy is known for his articles in mass media, prominently *The Straits Times*. He also has a social media presence, where he is an

“influencer” in the very best sense of that word. He shares about the books he reads and the people he meets — at least as proud of the achievements of his grandchildren as he is of his own accomplishments. Yet he also writes and posts with a mission: to educate the public about international law, to calm rising tensions between powerful states, or to support marginalised groups.

If we are very lucky, he may even post about today.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, for devoting his life to NUS, to Singapore, and to the world, may it please you to confer on Prof Tommy Koh the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws.