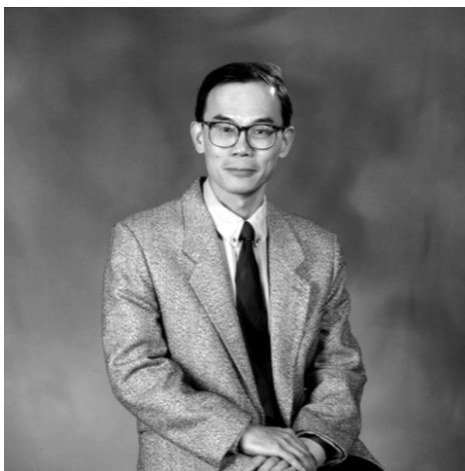


## OBITUARY



**TAN YOCK LIN (1953–2023)**

KEVIN Y.L. TAN\*

The 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2023 was a terrible day for colleagues at the National University of Singapore, Faculty of Law (“NUS Law”). It was the day when a dark pall descended upon the Faculty, as we were shocked and stunned by the news that our dear colleague, Yock Lin, had been tragically plucked from our midst in a fatal road accident. Even now, sitting here and writing this, I find his loss unfathomable.

Yock Lin joined the NUS Law Faculty as a Senior Tutor in 1982, the year I matriculated into Law School, and he was my tutor for Legal Method and System and Constitutional Theory. To say that he was an excellent teacher would be an understatement. Yock Lin infused every lesson with love and a command of the subject that engaged and energised his students. His seriousness as a scholar was matched by his warmth and humanity as a person. He inspired us all to learn more and do better all the time, and his patience was legendary. Yock Lin always had time for his students. He left no stone unturned in explaining the intricacies of any subject or question posed.

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\* Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore. This is a personal reflection on Yock Lin, whom I knew since 1982, and his impact on us all. I am grateful to his younger brother, Hin Lin, for sharing details of Yock Lin’s ‘pre-Singapore’ days in Malacca, as well as to other colleagues, especially Hans Tjio and Andrew Harding, who shared stories of their interactions with Yock Lin which I have tried to incorporate here.

Yock Lin was born on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1953 in Malacca, the third child in a family of ten. He was educated at the Tranquerah English School (known colloquially as “TES 1”) and was, from the start, its most outstanding student. He topped his cohort in every year and finished his primary school education with an amazing 100% attendance record. He then moved to the Gajah Berang Secondary English School (“GBSES”) which was about 1.5km outside Malacca city. To get to school, Yock Lin, like the rest of his siblings, cycled. At GBSES, Yock Lin again topped his cohort in every year with 100% attendance and was elected Head Prefect when he was in Form 5 and Form 6. At GBSES, he trained in gymnastics and played hockey for the school; indeed, he was also good enough to represent the State hockey team. His younger brother, Hin Lin, recalled the pride his family took in Yock Lin, not only for his accomplishments but also for his rectitude, perseverance and for never putting a foot wrong in anything that he did. Hin Lin told me, “As his sibling in the same school, we always felt protected. We’d simply say ‘Hey, Yock Lin is my brother’, and we’d get all the respect from potential bullies!”<sup>1</sup>

After completing his Form 6, Yock Lin won a scholarship to study Electrical Engineering at Imperial College in London. This was the first of three periods he spent living in the United Kingdom which he enjoyed greatly. One habit he picked up while in the UK was to wear his shoes when in the house. To nobody’s surprise, Yock Lin obtained a Double First in Electrical Engineering and returned to Malaysia to serve out his bond. He was sent to work in the Ipoh tin mines as an engineer and later moved to Singapore to work at the Economic Development Board (“EDB”), which offered him a post-graduate scholarship to read for a Diploma in Developmental Economics at Oxford. This was followed by a BA in Jurisprudence at Merton College. Thereafter, Yock Lin returned to Singapore and worked briefly under Dr Goh Keng Swee at the Monetary Authority of Singapore (“MAS”).

While at the MAS, Yock Lin applied to join the NUS Law Faculty as a Senior Tutor under a new scheme that had been introduced to entice more local law graduates to join academia. A staff seminar was organised and Yock Lin was invited to present a paper to the Faculty. In those days, this was effectively a formal job talk. Andrew Harding, then a junior faculty member, was asked to chair the talk. He recalled,

Yock Lin appeared, earnest, intelligent, and alert, his hair swept back over his head. The topic was a problem in the Law of Nuisance. We were treated to 45 minutes of insight, erudition and wit. We were blown away by his intelligence and his perfect Oxford accent. Needless to say, Yock Lin was hired and never looked back, becoming the beating heart, in a way, of NUS Law: a quiet but real presence and a genuine, sincere and highly intelligent colleague. I recall afterwards revealing I had also met Yock Lin’s brother, and everyone was keen to know if he, too, spoke with an Oxford accent. I said, ‘No, he spoke perfect Singlish’. There was much hilarity.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E-mail from Tan Hin Lin to Kevin Y.L. Tan, Adjunct Professor, National University of Singapore (1 Aug 2023).

<sup>2</sup> E-mail from Andrew James Harding, Visiting Research Professor, National University of Singapore to Kevin Y.L. Tan, Adjunct Professor, National University of Singapore (1 Aug 2023).

There was no doubt amongst those present that Yock Lin would be a fine academic, and things were set in motion to have his scholarship bond transferred from MAS to NUS.

Yock Lin proved to be the quintessential academic – erudite, humble, and always championing his students. Outside the classroom, he was a man of many parts. It seemed there was nothing he did not know, and if there was, he would master it in a week and happily share whatever he learned with you. He once told me that he offered to teach so many different subjects because it was the best way for him to learn new things. He told me:

The best way to master any subject is to try to teach it. You can get some of it wrong the first time, most of it right the second, and speak like an expert the third.

Every question offered a learning opportunity. Whenever Yock Lin didn't know the answer to a question, he would simply say, "I don't know, but let's find out." And in the days before the Internet, that would mean trotting down to the library with him and spending time among the catalogues and shelves working the problem through. Very quickly, I learned to follow up an "I don't know" with "but let me find out".

By inclination, Yock Lin was more of a private law lawyer than a public law lawyer, but no legal subject daunted him. The more complex it was, the more he relished it. I can still picture him in the Law Library at Kent Ridge, surrounded by a mountain of books, slowly picking his way through them, and taking notes (always with a pencil in his left hand) in his neat but not always legible script, before dashing back to his office to type it all up.

Yock Lin's intellectual appetite was as voracious as his mind was fecund. Everything fascinated him and he worked and wrote on a staggering number of subjects, as a selection of his legal publications at the end of this dedication demonstrates. I know of no other person with his breadth or depth of learning in Singapore law. He researched and wrote on the legal profession, criminal law, criminal procedure, family law, contracts, conflicts of laws, personal property, trusts and equity, and even public law. Deservedly, Yock Lin was made full Professor in 2000 and in 2010 became the inaugural Geoffrey Wilson Bartholomew Professor. On the occasion of his nominating Yock Lin for this prestigious chair, my colleague Hans Tjio wrote:

Yock Lin has done a lot in academia, and yet he will say that he is still slowly finding his feet. This after traversing through the laws of evidence, criminal procedure, conflict of laws, the legal profession and now trust law. We all know about the jack of all trades, but here we have one who is also a master of them all. One who has written copiously, and produced learned books in at least five disparate areas. He has masked all of this with a modesty that is extremely wearing, and, hopefully, after this nomination, we shall see less of it ...

... if one had to describe Yock Lin, it is that he is the consummate commercial lawyer, much as Geoffrey was. The modern-day commercial lawyer, usually self-proclaimed, is probably interested in the minutiae of some complex financial transaction. But there was a time, possibly a better time, when commercial

lawyers started out with a foundation in the common law, and perhaps property law and trusts. Both Geoffrey and Yock Lin were like that, and more. Both found time to research family law, with Geoffrey writing at least 10 articles in the area, and Yock Lin his book, *Conflicts Issues in Family and Succession Law* (Butterworths, 1993).

It is in commercial law, and particularly the area of choses in action, however, that Yock Lin is best-known in the international arena. His (1990) *Law Quarterly Review* piece on champerty and assignment of choses in action provides in effect the foundation of an entire chapter of one of the leading books in the area in the world (Greg Tolhurst, *The Assignment of Contractual Rights* (Hart Publishing, 2006)). And he has recently returned to the area to question if choses in action are in fact more contractual rather than proprietary in the (2010) *Journal of Contract Law*. But perhaps heeding more than anyone else Geoffrey's call for an autochthonous system of law ... Yock Lin has directed most of his prodigious efforts on writing books on Singapore law and the profession here.

No one has his width and depth of knowledge in Singapore law. No individual has done more for law reform in Singapore, with Yock Lin having spent almost 20 years in the Singapore Academy of Law's Law Reform Committee, where he has, it is safe to say, been involved in most of the projects there.

At the Faculty, Yock Lin did not gravitate towards administrative work of any sort although he served happily when called upon to do so. He was Deputy Director of the Centre for Commercial Law Studies and, later, Chair of the Faculty Promotion and Tenure Committee. Despite his natural disinclination towards administration and his love of research, Yock Lin told everyone that he willingly served because the University asked so little of its faculty: when it did, "we cannot possibly turn it down."

Outside the Faculty, Yock Lin served on the Singapore Academy of Law's Law Reform Committee since its inception in 1988. Justice of Appeal LP Thean, who was the first Chairman of the Committee considered Yock Lin its 'most important member'. Certainly its longest-serving member, Yock Lin has been influential across the spectrum of law reform, including illegality, trust law, and evidence and procedure. In 2008, he was conferred the Public Service Medal (Pingat Bakti Masyarakat, PBM) for his contributions to reforming the laws of this nation.

Colleagues at NUS Law remember Yock Lin not only for his scintillating intellect but also for his great warmth and avuncular personality. He always made time for his friends, students and colleagues. Speaking for myself, Yock Lin was instrumental in my becoming an academic. He led by example; I was happy to follow. Indeed, many of my classmates and I would try to imitate Yock Lin's stentorian voice and speech, so impressive was it. In those days, when the staff telephone directory was public information, I was told that some of my female classmates would ring Yock Lin up, just to hear him say "Hello" and then hang up.

Throughout my student days, Yock Lin remained my favourite mentor. In my first year, I was somehow elected as Academic Secretary of the Law Club, wherefore one of my tasks was to prepare a debating team for the inter-faculty competition.

Back then, there was a hierarchy even for students. Senior students, assuming that their reputations preceded them, waited to be invited to represent the Faculty. I thought that made no sense. I wanted to hold auditions and select the best speakers. Most of the seniors boycotted my auditions and I ended up with a team of my Year 1 classmates and two Year 2 students. Yock Lin offered to serve as coach and chief sounding-board and, in the face of naysayers, we beat every team we faced. To celebrate, Yock Lin took us for lunch at the old Faculty Club in Kent Ridge.

After completing a Bachelor of Civil Law at Oxford University, Yock Lin returned to teach numerous generations of law students at NUS. Over the years, we became and remained friends, but perhaps not so close as we might have been. I suppose we were each drawn to different aspects and facets of the law and our careers moved in quite different trajectories. Even so, I always relish our meetings, our bantering with each other in the corridor, and our sometimes heated debate over some new case. We shared a common deep love of classical music and would often talk about concerts we attended, recordings we listened to, and favourite musicians. Yock Lin himself sang and played the cello (Bach was his favourite). He had a wonderful collection of classical records. At one time, when Yock Lin was renouncing some of his worldly goods, I was the beneficiary of a big part of that marvellous classical LP collection.

For someone so accomplished and brilliant as Yock Lin was, he never took himself too seriously. Indeed, as my colleague Hans Tjio quipped, “He was a legal giant who behaved like he was the least of us.” Yock Lin never lost his deep humility, or his rapier-sharp wit: he could be a lot of fun, although he did take *some* things rather seriously. Yock Lin was always a sartorial dresser. His brother, Tiow Lin (he of the perfect ‘Singlish’) told me that when they went on holiday, Yock Lin would be the first to wake up and he would prepare a full English breakfast for them. But he would admonish them for not dressing properly for breakfast – so off they went to change out of their pyjamas before tucking in. Yock Lin, who wore glasses most of his life, loved trying different spectacle frames. I remember how he got so excited by Owndays’ ‘50% off for the second pair’ deal. Once, when he traded a pair of rimless spectacles for a pair of thick round plastic frames, I remarked that his new frames made him look like Jean-Paul Sartre (whose works Yock Lin had read in the original French). Without missing a beat, Yock Lin retorted: “Ah, if only they could make me think like him!”

Yock Lin touched us all deeply. He is sorely missed. Although he is no longer with us, his rich legacy – of scholarship, friends, and generations of grateful students – will remain with us for a long time to come. Everything we do, Yock Lin somehow did better.

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