the **Tommy Koh** reader

Favourite Essays and Lectures

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Favourite Essays and Lectures

Tommy Koh

Ambassador-at-Large, Singapore

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I wish to dedicate this book to the following men and women who have or had worked with me as my Personal Assistant.

Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore

Mr Young Cheng Wah
Mr Lee Cheuk Yen

Permanent Mission of Singapore to the United Nations

Ms Ng Chwee Tee
Mr Wilson Teo
Mrs Gloria Elizabeth Monteiro
Ms Soh Geok Lian

Embassy of Singapore, Washington, DC

Mr Subramony
Mrs Jenny Tan

National Arts Council

Ms Soh Guek Keow

Asia–Europe Foundation

Mrs Jenny Tan

Institute of Policy Studies

Ms Mabel Chung
Ms Cynthia Lin
Mrs Jenny Tan
Ms Cecilia Kuek

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ms Lily Ng
Ms Wong Fei Joo
Ms Lee Gek Kim

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Foreword

It is a great pleasure and honour to write this foreword for *The Tommy Koh Reader*, a collection of essays and lectures by one of our most esteemed members in the National University of Singapore (NUS) community, Professor Tommy Koh.

Professor Koh is a well-known figure in Singapore and internationally, having served for many decades as one of our foremost diplomats, and also for his many leading contributions to the development of the arts and culture scene of Singapore. For NUS, he was one of our brightest law students at the inception of the Law Faculty, garnering first-class honours, before going on to complete post-graduate studies in Harvard and Cambridge. He served with distinction as Dean of the Law Faculty from 1971 to 1974. Education remains a powerful passion for Professor Koh, and we are grateful that he has continued his close association with his alma mater, offering his valuable insights and wisdom for new generations of students as Rector of Tembusu College.

Professor Koh has written that he would have happily served out his career as an academic and educator. But fate would have it otherwise, and in 1968, he was asked to serve as our fledging nation's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (1968–1971, 1974–1984). From that point on, he would go forward to establish an illustrious diplomatic career, serving in a succession of high offices, including Ambassador to the US (1984–1990), Special Envoy of the UN (1993), and presently, Ambassador-at-Large.

As a diplomat, he worked tirelessly in service of Singapore, from the crucial period when it had just become a newly independent nation. His writings capture the temper of those years, with its challenges and triumphs, and in particular, he illuminates, as few can, the fortitude and

courage of our post-independence leadership as they worked relentlessly to carve out the political and economic space for Singapore's survival and growth.

Though he often had to roam far from the shores of our island state, his heart was always firmly rooted in the soil of Singapore. His indefatigable passion, talents and intellect were directed especially, to the fields of arts, culture and heritage preservation — topics which lie especially close to his heart. A well-known patron and supporter of the arts, he was the founding Chairman of the National Arts Council (1991 to 1996), and subsequently, Chairman of the National Heritage Board (2002 to 2011). Working through these institutions, and often through his personal initiatives, he has made immense contributions to promoting and expanding not only the range, but the quality of artistic and cultural opportunities and experiences available to all Singaporeans.

The essays, lectures, and speeches in this collection are thus drawn from a life rich in experience and learning, and are grouped into broad categories: Family, Career, Singapore, Diplomacy, the Law, Art, Culture and Heritage, and finally, Nature and the Environment. These writings reflect Professor's Koh's diverse interests and formidable intellect, and the topics he addresses range from weighty issues such as the rule of law and income disparity, to more lighthearted fare such as Singapore's unique hawker cuisine, botany and even, the naming of roads. He has not hesitated to voice disagreement with prevailing policies or orthodoxies, but always offers his dissenting opinions in good faith, and in a manner intended to encourage greater engagement and understanding. His exposition is clear, forthright and precise; but in his more personal reflections, it is easy to discern the effervescent good humour and warm-hearted humanity that has made him a widely admired public figure.

Taken together, this book is much more than a collection of written works and speeches that summarises Professor Koh's career and contributions. We are offered a rare glimpse into the values and beliefs that he holds most dearly, and which have guided his actions and undertakings in his long and distinguished career. For instance, from his mother, he writes touchingly of inheriting her keen eye for aesthetics, good graces

and zest for vivacious living; from his father, the importance of learning and the joy of reading, but also the need for grit and recovering from hard knocks; and from his formative school years, an acceptance and celebration of diversity and the many hues of our multi-racial society, and an equal intolerance towards ethnic and racial prejudice.

Professor Tommy Koh describes himself amongst these pages as having been “a happy warrior for peace”. It is a wonderfully apt phrase, as all his efforts have indeed been directed towards the singular objective of creating a better quality of life for all in a safer world. In pursuit of that objective, he has been unsparing and devoted, and the results have been both remarkable and transformative. Yet, throughout his distinguished career, he has always retained a common touch, and an abiding interest and concern for his fellow citizens, particularly those in our society who are less fortunate, or who are more vulnerable. He remains an engaged citizen, and a man of goodwill, modesty and warm generosity.

The world has changed greatly since Professor Koh started out as a young diplomat, but his life and experiences exemplify many crucial traits that have only gained in relevance: a steadfast adherence to principles; an acceptance of diversity and multi-cultural possibilities; a joyful sense of curiosity; and living a purposeful life that impacts positively on society. We would all do well if we could emulate Professor Koh's example of being a tireless advocate for mutual respect, inclusive collaboration and shared advancement.

Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President
National University of Singapore

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