

New book on life, legacy of late chief justice Yong Pung How

It contains tributes, lists his career milestones; PM Lee calls him one of Singapore's titans

Jean Iau
Correspondent

As a young lawyer, Associate Professor Dorcas Quek Anderson was taken aback by how personable her first boss was, given his courtroom reputation as a strict and steely judge.

The 44-year-old recalled how former chief justice Yong Pung How played a key role in her foray into academia by taking the time to read the first article she wrote for submission to a law journal.

Said the former district judge, who now teaches at Singapore Management University: "He was very encouraging and gave me the courage to submit it for publication. That publication, as well as my early years being a justices' law clerk, helped me discover my passion for research and writing in the area of law."

In a new biography on the late Mr Yong, she and 63 other former justices' law clerks paint the "Chief" – as many affectionately called him – as a kind and warm figure who enjoyed chats over lunches and always made time for them.

Their tributes make up one chapter in the book, titled *Pioneer, Polymath And Mentor: The Life And Legacy Of Yong Pung How*. It was launched on April 11, which would have been Mr Yong's 98th birthday.

The book, which details Mr Yong's career milestones, was written, compiled and edited by Senior Judge Andrew Phang, who retired as justice of the Court of Appeal in 2022.

Mr Yong died on Jan 9, 2020, at the age of 93. He served as chief justice from 1990 to 2006, implementing rigorous reforms and leveraging technology to streamline the Singapore court system during his tenure.

Officiating the book launch, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recalled his childhood encounters

with Mr Yong, who was close friends with his father, founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew. The pair studied law at Cambridge University together.

PM Lee said that shortly before he became prime minister, he received a message that Mr Yong wanted to personally administer the affirmation for his swearing-in ceremony, and not just stand beside him as PM Lee read out the affirmation himself.

"I was very honoured, and of course agreed immediately. That was how we did it. Mine is just one of the many stories of Mr Yong touching the lives of others, and leaving a lasting imprint," he said.

Mr Yong's daughter, Ms Yong Ying-I, who chairs the Central Provident Fund Board, said during the launch that her father was not keen to write his autobiography after he retired as he wondered if it would be seen as showing off.

Ms Yong announced that she would donate \$10 million to the National University Health System (NUHS) in her mother's name for a programme carrying Mr Yong's name. Mr Yong's wife, Madam Cheang Wei-Woo, died a few weeks ago.

NUHS chief executive Yeoh Khay Guan said the donation would strengthen NUHS' care, research and education, and he looked forward to sharing more details on the initiatives it will make possible.

PM Lee added that it was Mr Yong's impeccable integrity that led Mr Lee Kuan Yew to choose him in 1980 to build the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) from scratch as its first managing director.

Mr Yong's strong sense of duty and service to Singapore led him to answer the elder Mr Lee's subsequent call to serve as chief justice in 1989, even though this entailed a drastic pay cut as he was then chairman and chief executive of OCBC Bank, PM Lee added.



Guests purchasing the book, *Pioneer, Polymath And Mentor: The Life And Legacy Of Yong Pung How*, at its launch at Singapore Management University on April 11. Mr Yong, who served as chief justice from 1990 to 2006, died on Jan 9, 2020, at the age of 93. ST PHOTOS: MARK CHEONG



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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR DORCAS QUEK ANDERSON, in her tribute to Mr Yong Pung How (above), her first boss. She said he played a key role in her foray into academia by taking the time to read the first article she wrote for submission to a law journal.

Over his tenure, Mr Yong tightened case management, modernised court processes and championed using technology to improve efficiency.

He set up specialist courts, raised judges' salaries to attract legal talent, and initiated the Justices' Law Clerk scheme to recruit top law graduates to the legal service.

In his first speech as chief justice, he abolished the traditional wigs worn by judges and lawyers, and salutations such as "My Lord" or

"Your Lordship" for Supreme Court judges.

PM Lee said: "Everyone remembers Mr Lee Kuan Yew as the founder of modern Singapore. But Mr Lee had close colleagues and collaborators in his team who made many crucial contributions to Singapore, some of whom have not been adequately recognised. I am glad that books are now being written about them."

He listed former deputy prime ministers S. Rajaratnam and Goh

Keng Swee, and now Mr Yong as examples, and called Mr Yong "one of these titans".

In another tribute in the biography, Senior Counsel Harpreet Singh recalled how Mr Yong offered to introduce him to bankers he knew, should funding from his then law firm Drew & Napier not arrive to help him pay for his master's degree at Harvard.

Mr Singh noted that he did not have to take up Mr Yong's offer, but was deeply touched by the gesture.

Speaking to The Straits Times, Mr Singh said: "It's important to us who worked closely with former chief justice Yong to give a full portrayal of the many different aspects of the man."

"The public gets a certain view, but it's not a complete view. Human beings have many facets to them... For those of us who worked very closely with him, we were very privileged to see that side of him."

jeaniau@sph.com.sg