

Tapestries: A Teaching Life
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Tapestries

A TEACHING LIFE



by MRS TOH KAH BENG

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Foreword

MOST PEOPLE WILL never appreciate this. In fact, many of us might pass through life without being aware how precious the gift of knowledge is.

In this electronic age, there is too much information, too much data that is badly put together, analysed and reproduced as garbage, disguised as research.

But data, when packaged responsibly and delivered into the minds of the audience, becomes knowledge. It is a gift of knowledge from the presenter to the audience, from the teacher, to the student.

Mrs Toh is such a gifter. She imparted knowledge.

Mrs Toh taught my geography class when I was in Sec 1. She ranked amongst the top three teachers I feared. Although she has a pleasant personality, her gentle voice carries a tone that hints of a strict disciplinarian hiding within. Mrs Toh was the form teacher of class 1D of Raffles Institution in 1983. Somehow, the over-boisterous young men in 1B managed, on several occasions, to disturb her teaching two doors away. When a sudden hush descended in class, we would turn around to see Mrs Toh at the front door, sporting her cold, terror-striking glare.

During her classes, our note taking had to be brief, yet meticulous: well annotated maps, properly labelled coastal formations, neatly drawn nuclear settlements, etc.

As I went into higher schooling, to university and into working life, I began to appreciate the work of many of my teachers such as Mrs Toh.

Genuine teachers want their students to become better than themselves. The real teachers do not hold back any knowledge, they give all and they learn some more in order to give even more. The real teachers know that they are students of their students, that they are learning as they teach. And through the sometimes-dumb-often-relevant-but-unthinking questions of their students, the best teachers learn and grow. And in return they enrich their students even more.

Mrs Toh was not just earnest in delivering the content in class. She carefully graded our work. Most importantly, she took pains to understand what we could not understand (and therefore handing her a landfill of an essay) and then put right the wrong things in our teenage heads.

It is this gift from Mrs Toh that I feel gratitude for. And today, I wish my children's teachers are similarly dedicated in trying to understand where my children

are falling short and how the mind-gaps might be filled.

Although I subsequently majored in Chemistry and organometallic synthesis in the university, I believe that perhaps, in some roundabout way, Mrs Toh's geography lessons made me the real estate consultant and commentator that I am today.

Thank you for teaching me, Mrs Toh.

Ku Swee Yong
CEO
Century 21



My parents with my brother and I

Growing Up

*Growing up in the early days of Singapore
post-Japanese Occupation,
as seen through the eyes of a little girl
1945-1960*



My three brothers and I

In The Beginning

NOW THAT THERE is a shift in our education policy to focus on teaching our children values and building character, allow me to offer a personal moral tale.

When my mother was pregnant, the doctor at a hospital diagnosed it as a tumour. Fortunately, the young doctor at a private clinic knew otherwise, congratulated my mother and told her she would be giving birth to twins, one of whom turned out to be me. My mother was overjoyed until the nurse told her she had to pay \$30.

My parents were poor, so my mother panicked and wept. But the doctor came out of his consultation room and told the nurse not to collect a cent from my mother. The young doctor went on to occupy the highest office of our land. He was Singapore's second president, Dr Benjamin Sheares.

Being the quiet and humble person that he was, Singaporeans did not know about his kindness and compassion until after his death. It is heartening to know that the new education policy will highlight moral education.

To this end, publishing a book of real-life moral tales may be quite effective in imparting values and building character. I conclude with the cautionary tale of a man who found his sick father a burden and wrapped him in a straw mat to discard him under the gaze of his young son.

Subsequently, his son asked him how much he paid for the straw mat as he would be discarding him the same way. Adults are role models. The values that are taught in school will come to nought if adults do not set the right example.

Sook Ching (肃清)

IF YOU WALK down South Bridge Road towards the Hindu temple, you will see on the same side as the temple a sign: “Sook Ching 100 metres”. Sook Ching in Chinese is 肃清.

When the Japanese conquered Singapore, they asked all men to gather at this place at Upper Cross Street to check for anti-Japanese activists—大检证. All the men had to squat beneath the scorching sun.

In the very front sat a Japanese officer and an interpreter, with his head covered, for fear that people might recognise him as a traitor—汉奸. My father was with my grandfather and a neighbour. My grandfather was ill and could not stand the heat. My father put him on his back quickly and then stood up waving his white handkerchief. They were beckoned forward by the Japanese soldiers all standing around their officer.

My neighbour tried to cut the queue by pretending to help hold my grandfather. The officer asked about my father's job, according to the interpreter. My father replied that he repaired typewriters 打字机, but the Japanese officer heard 飞机 which meant aeroplane. He thought my father was a pilot. He pushed his long

sword forward towards my father's abdomen suddenly. My father dodged, much to the anger of the officer.

Luckily the interpreter told him my father repaired typewriters. My father and my grandfather were allowed home. My neighbour was not so lucky. He happily said he was a clerk and knew English. He had to go up a lorry. He bade my father farewell, smiling.

Those in the lorries were sent to Changi Beach to be shot to death. It was really a farewell forever for him. I do not know how many men were unfortunate enough to be sent up the lorries not knowing their fate. This happened before 1945.

In 1946 I was born. If you ask me what I think of the Japanese, I can only say “NO COMMENTS!”

Life After The Japanese Occupation

IT WAS IN the 50s. Life was simple but hard for most people. After the Japanese Occupation, people became more helpful and kind to one another, having gone through the tortures, public beheadings and all the atrocities committed by the Japanese intruders.

I was very young then, born at the end of 1946. I was extremely curious about my surroundings. If I remember correctly, the street lamps were lighted with kerosene and there was this man who walked up and down the streets holding a long stick with an overturned tin stuck to it.

He cupped the flames from the street lamps to extinguish them. The stalls that lined Telok Ayer and Amoy Streets had long benches on which stools were put. People crouched on the stools to eat. Office workers, trishaw pullers and it seemed like people from everywhere were mingling here.

Since the “banana” money (they were named after the banana trees printed on them) were of no use now, people were generally poor. My mother told me my neighbours were richer than us because they dared to keep British currency during the Japanese period, while we dared not.

There were also groups formed in the streets to watch acrobatic performances, the Indian man performing with his snake, people telling stories. This was how they earned a living with no capital.

I watched the snake charmer’s performance for free while clinging to my window grilles from the second floor where I lived. As for the storyteller, my mother and I would move away when he started to collect money at the most interesting part, and we returned later to listen to him.

That was how we spent our leisure time.

There was a Chinese teacher, Mr Yang. He liked to tell us about the Japanese Occupation. I remember one incident he related. He said he was a 17-year-old when the British returned and one British soldier threw him a piece of mouldy chocolate. He was starving and that mouldy chocolate was the best thing he had ever tasted.

I taught in the afternoon session which consisted of the Sec 1, 2 and 3. The morning session had the Sec 4, Pre-U 1 and Pre-U 2. There were only five lady teachers including me in the afternoon session. The others were Miss Lee Ai Lian, Miss Hua Yen Cheng, Mrs Ling Ding Ying and Ms Shanti Mathani.

We were pampered by the male teachers who would not let us do any heavy work. I told myself: "Peck Hoon, you have reached home."

And home it was for me for the next 20 years till I left in 1987.



The Staff Room at RI

A Man I Respect To This Day

ON MY FIRST day at RI, I met Miss Tay King Ying who gave me the widest smile of welcome.

Then I proceeded to see this great man that I have held in respect to this day. The room smelt of oak walls or was it my imagination? It was very Victorian. I saw seated there a lanky man with a receding hairline. But nonetheless he commanded such dignity that you could not help but respect him. His large table was so organised he could spread the whole Straits Times on it. He had a pipe in his mouth which reminded me of an English gentleman.

"If I give you Sec 3 Geography, you think you can manage?"

"I shall try."

Our conversation was only two sentences but I told myself I could work for this man for life. I did not know why. He was not handsome or anything like that but I believe he shared my passion for education.

I went to second-hand bookstores to buy geography books and compiled them into notes in point form. When I went to class, I only carried my container of water and my handbag, no books. In class I would jot down notes point by point and explain. If the boys were

not paying attention, they would only have the points. Once I drew the whole world map on the board without any reference to books. The boys gaped in amazement. I gained their respect even more.

Mr Philip Liao was not a person you could meddle with. Once during Sports Day, a lady teacher did not do her assigned duty at the sports meet as she was busy marking books. Mr Liao asked a boy from the Photographic Society to take a picture of her. Hey presto, she was gone in a few days, out of RI.

On another occasion, an expatriate teacher came to school wearing very short pants. After being told off by Mr Liao, he came the following day in coat and tie, probably as a protest. Well, Mr Liao left him alone. Soon the man was unable to stand the tropical heat and returned in a modest shirt and proper pants.

On another occasion a long-haired boy came to say he could not cut his hair for a hundred days because of his grandmother's death. Mr Liao was all sympathy and asked him to return a hundred days later. The following day the boy returned with a neat haircut.

Mr Liao did not always ask the Ministry permission to do things. Imagine no lessons after recess for half a year in preparation for National Day.

Unfortunately this great man died of lung cancer and Singapore lost a great educator.

RI At Bras Basah Road

WHENEVER I THOUGHT of RI at Bras Basah Road, I would remember the smell of age, the white colonial buildings, the people I loved, the eagerness to go into this embrace of warmth and friendship, the witty boys who could make a joke out of everything. I was stern but I think it was a love-hate relationship between the boys and I.

They respected me and liked me, at the same time not daring to step on my toes. Some even shared intimate secrets with me that I shall bring to the grave. I was only a few years older than them. Being in my early twenties I became one of them. Life was tough then for most of us. I gave them whatever bags I could find at home if I saw theirs torn.

I was always wearing *cheongsams* (my mother said they looked decent on ladies). I wore high-heeled shoes and chased wildly for buses in those. Once when I wore a white blouse and dark blue skirt, the bus conductor gave me a student's ticket, thinking I was one. Ah, the delight of being mistaken for a student.

I used to conduct the school song at daily assemblies while the teachers and the principal stood behind me

on the stage. Teachers sat on the stage, you see.

But there were the evening assemblies on the field before dismissal. Once it poured during one of these dismissal assemblies. Everyone was drenched. I went to the ladies' to dry my hair, but when I came out of the bathroom, everyone was gone.

At that time the Capitol Theatre opposite us was showing "The Crows" by Alfred Hitchcock. I imagined the crows attacking me. I beat a quick exit, hair in disarray, like a mad woman.



One of the classrooms at Bras Basah Road RI

Teach Your Passion!

GEOGRAPHY IS AN interesting subject that comprises physical geography, regional geography and topography. I love all of them. In fact I bought more books to read out of interest. I believe my love for the subject had instilled in my students the love for it too. Therefore the teacher must love what she is doing.

As I had said, every day was a challenge, an adventure. The boys of the ten classes I was teaching were witty and we pulled one another's legs. Of course knowing me, I would not allow them to cross the line.

I remembered one April Fools' Day, I was all geared up. I knew that my boys would surely not let me off. As I entered the classroom, from a distance I saw something odd on my table. As I approached, I saw a bloodied thumb with cotton wool and lots of red ink. I just walked to the table, took up the thumb and threw it into the waste paper basket, much to the sounds of despair from my boys. Now to think of it, perhaps I should have shrieked and acted the part of a fainting woman.

On another April Fools' Day all my boys from the ten classes decided to change classrooms to confuse the

teachers. I just entered the classroom I was supposed to be in and carried on teaching, amidst ooohs and ahhs from the boys.

I think by now you will understand why I was a teacher. Once, a student asked me why I was a teacher and I answered, “Well, you see, I need to earn a living—to be frank with you—and secondly, I love my job”.



Staff photo at RI

Geography Examination

I REMEMBER I was supposed to set the geography paper’s multiple-choice questions. I set it such that all the answers were “A”. I had wanted to find out who the ones were who would do all the questions with confidence because they had studied well.

Now, there were a few who were puzzled by the possibility that all 40 questions had “A” for the correct answers.

One by one they came to ask me, “Mrs Toh, is there a typing error?” or “Mrs Toh there must be some mistake there?”

To all I answered, “No.” Some boys changed some of their answers to “B”.

It was so easy to mark as the answers were all “A”. I lost a lot of energy containing my laughter. I saw a boy winking at me. Apparently, he was not tricked.

Regrets

A VERY SAD mistake I made in RI. He stood before me, for flag lowering. I could see the eyeshadow and a faint hint of lipstick. I had always had a tender spot for this boy and I knew he liked and trusted me.

Gently, I told him to wash off his make-up. Very effeminate, a case that nature had made. He told me—and it was not meant to be a secret—“Mrs Toh, I am a woman born into a man’s body.” He was in my Sec 3 class. What could I say to comfort him? Never mind, all of us are like that?

My class boys knew his inclination but were kind enough not to laugh at him. I felt sorry for him and spent a lot of time with him, just talking, idle chatting. He enjoyed our conversations.

A few years later, he came to see me. Hair dyed a bright blonde and behaving in every way, a lady. Unfortunately, I had to hurry to class. I only had enough time to learn from him that he was with a pub band in Johore. I was glad that at least he got a job. I was extremely glad to see my friend again.

I saw the other RI boys watch in bewilderment at this “creature” that Mrs Toh was talking to. I told him to wait in the tuckshop for me till I finished class.

After class, I was only too eager to meet my long lost friend. Most of the teachers stopped me out of good will, saying Mr Philip Liao might think I was encouraging such appearance and behaviour. There was a struggle inside me.

Must I sadden the heart of a man I held in high regard, or attend to a poor young man who needed my attention? I made a wrong choice, and I have lived to regret it. I broke my promise and did not meet him. He must be very angry, yet it was not in him to be such. He was too gentle a boy who loved his teacher dearly.

I am telling you now I am still feeling really bad and like a villain.

Primary School

IN MY PINING for RI, I had forgotten the little ones whom I had taught in the primary school. On the first day there, I really did not know what was happening on some occasions. As I went through the children's "Thank You" cards and the encouraging and thankful responses from parents, I told myself, "Hey, what about them—are they not your students as well?"

I browsed through their photographs. I am able to remember most of them. I read the letters of parents asking me for help in handling their children, and their sincere gratitude. It warms my heart. "Peck Hoon, you have not been doing so badly after all." I know self-praise is international disgrace and all that, but I thought I deserved a pat on my back for all I had done.

The first day was the worst. I got really confused. "Cher, when collect milk money, huh?" Milk money? What was that? Later I learnt from my children that I had to collect money and deliver milk to class. Then after recess, I thought I could wait for them to come up on their own as was the case in RI.

One little chap came. "Cher, you don't go down, we cannot go up." What was he trying so hard to tell

me? I was not HOD then. I went to the canteen to "collect" them.

I soon loved all of them. Serious. Sometimes they were naughty. But I think something must be wrong if children are not naughty sometimes. When I asked a question, there would be little hands raised, and a clamour, "Cher, I, Cher, I." I knew that behind each little hand there was an honest craving for attention. Most children do not know how to be hypocrites.

My love for them soon grew so deep that the children and I were inseparable, much to the envy of some teachers. I loved children from other classes too. Generally I have a soft spot for children. It was not the children but the adults who had made life difficult for me.

"Of course what, from RI, you know..." when I did not even brag I was from RI. Except that the principal told the whole school I came from RI.

I say again from the bottom of my heart... if you do not love children, teaching is not the job for you. If you want to brag about your wealth, then talk to the air. It pained me to see children made to stare at the brightness and heat of the setting sun. You out there, do you hear? Get out! Do not harm the innocent children who up till now still remember you so fondly.

Testimonial 1: A Caring Teacher

IT WAS 1985. I was in Sec 2. I had a very caring, though very strict teacher—Mrs Toh Kah Beng. I will never forget her. She taught me that love need not come with conditions.

It was end of my Sec 2 when I applied for a bursary for the next year. Mrs Toh called me to the front, asked me why I applied. As a very timid boy, coming from a Hokkien speaking home, I respected but always had a fear for this teacher. I almost cried, thinking that she was going to scold me. After explaining that my dad was the only one working to support a family of six, living in a one-bedroom flat, she simply asked me to follow her.

Walking down the stairs to the ground floor, I started crying. To my surprise, she brought me to the bookstore, asked for all the Sec 3 textbooks, paid for them and asked me to go back to class. I was too shocked to say thank you.

She was the first person in my life to demonstrate that love need not come with conditions.

Besides my parents, brothers and relatives, she was deeply etched in my young mind, to be kind and helpful. She was also the same teacher who punished me very severely once—by cleaning all the teachers' tables!

I will not forget you! Mrs Toh. I want to thank you, for your love and a lesson that I remember till now.

*Gui Eng Hong
RI Class of 1987*

Testimonial 2: A Caring Teacher

HELLO MRS TOH, was really happy to see you on Yew Chong's post after all these years! Not sure if you would remember me—you were my form teacher in Sec 2D (1983), and you would insist on calling me Fook Cheong as that was my registered name on the NRIC, even though everyone else called me Simon.

You may be pleased to know that you are my most fondly thought of teacher during my years in RI. I still tell people how you would tell us to leave a spare change of clothes in the class cupboard (just in case we got caught in the rain), kept some biscuits handy in case we got hungry, and taught us well to be caring and respectful.

I also appreciated how you would motivate me and help me set realistic targets to push myself ahead. So thank you for being such a caring and wonderful teacher. May I wish you good health always.

With best regards,
Fook Cheong/Simon

*Simon Loh
RI Class of 1985*

Acknowledgements

I am glad that the proceeds from this book will go to help the Agape School for the Deaf in East Timor. It has always been my belief that people should love and care for one another to make this world a better place.

With this small contribution, I hope to do my part in making it so. I was very much inspired by Dr Tan Cheng Bock who took an interest in my book even before it was published. His kindness has given me the push, the green light, to go ahead with this project.

My Family

My dear husband has not only given me the moral support I need but is also my human walking stick because of my weak left leg. My two sons, Toh Chin Lam and Toh Chin Hon, who kept on telling me to go ahead as it is for a charitable cause.

My elder daughter-in-law, Kong Ling Yee, whose superb command of English and reading of my episodes kindled my spirit to go on.

My Siblings and their spouses

Ang Lip Keng, Ang Lip Tiong, Ang Lip Chor, Ang Lip Jin, Ang Lip Chuan, Ang Pek Hong and their spouses; Judy Lee who does missionary work, Chan Pau Keng, Tay Guat Hong, Hwai Jen, Colin Sim.

These people had not bothered about what the book is about nor its price and placed pre-sale orders because they know their sister is doing this for a good cause.

My ex-RI students

Their trust in me is good enough to encourage me. I shall not name them. Firstly it will be too long a list and secondly I may miss out some of their names.

The RI Alumni and the RI Museum

The Rafflesian Spirit has told me: "Fear not, we are with you all the way." I used information and pictures from the museum for my book.

Hoh Chung Shih who provided me with a set of lovely photographs to select for the cover image of this book.

Dominic Chua, Kavita, Cheryl Yap, Mary Wang, Chelsia Ho and Chung Shih had helped to publicise my book to all Rafflesians. Their reassurance keeps me at peace. With this huge group behind me, what more do I doubt?

Friends

Again I do not wish to have a list of names in case I miss out any of them. But these people have offered me not only friendship but also the trust that I need.

My editors

Russ Neu and Alvan Yap who have done the editing for free. We saved costs this way. I shall also mention a gem of a person, Norvin Chan, who, amidst his examination, helped me to zip up my files and send the soft copy to Russ. He is now with Openlectures.

Mrs Toh Kah Beng

About the Author



MRS TOH KAH BENG (Ang Peck Hoon) started her teaching career at Anderson Secondary School as a recruit teacher from 1966 to mid 1967. She was transferred to Raffles Institution to teach from 1967 to 1987. She became the Head of Department (Pupil Management) in Henry Park Primary School till her retirement in 2002.

After her retirement Mrs Toh did volunteer work for some time looking after children with cancer at the Kandang Kerbau Hospital before giving up because of a failed knee replacement operation.

A fervent believer in doing good and contributing back to the world, Mrs Toh also made bags for sale and the money raised was sent to remote parts of Africa to help them set up a library and buy books for needy children.

Her passion for painting has led her to pursue a course at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in oil painting. Presently she is still studying painting at the Kreta Ayer Community Club. She is very happy that her former RI boys have helped to sell her paintings for charity.

Her wish now is to do more charitable work and pursue her hobby in painting and, of course, smelling the morning dew.