

Biographical notes

Tommy Koh Thong Bee (12 November 1937 -) – Academic/diplomat

Tommy Koh Thong Bee was born in Singapore to Penang-born businessman Koh Han Kok, and Shanghainese actress and dancer, See Tsai Ying. He was the eldest of three sons.¹

Koh attended Kong Shang Primary School, St Joseph Institution and Outram Primary School between 1945 and 1952. He then received his secondary and post-secondary education at Raffles Institution (1952-1957), before earning an entrance scholarship to study law at the University of Malaya, Singapore.²

Koh was among the pioneer batch of law students at the University. He graduated with a first class honours in 1961, and did his law pupillage with David Marshall before being admitted to the bar in 1961. In 1962, Koh left the legal practice and joined the University as an assistant lecturer before going on to Harvard Law School on a fellowship.³ After graduating with a Master of Laws in 1964, Koh returned to teach at the University of Malaya, Singapore.⁴

Koh's diplomatic career began in 1968 when he was first appointed as the Singapore Permanent Representative to the United Nations.⁵ He held that position for 13 years (1968-1971, 1974-1984), and was concurrently High Commissioner to Canada and Ambassador to Mexico.⁶ Between 1971 and 1974, Koh served as Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Singapore.⁷

In 1984, Koh was appointed Singapore ambassador to the United States, a post he held until 1990.⁸ As ambassador, Koh was instrumental in arranging for then Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to make an address to the U.S. Congress in 1985, a first for any Southeast Asian country leader.⁹

Over the years, Koh has chaired various significant international conferences including the United Nations Law of the Seas (UNCLOS, 1980-1982) and the Preparatory Committee for the Main Committee of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio Conference, 1990-1992). In 1993, he was appointed Special Envoy by the UN General Assembly to mediate between Russia and the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia on the issue of Russian troop withdrawal.¹⁰

¹ ["Tommy Koh's father dies on holiday"](#), *The Straits Times*, 1 November 1985; Sumiko Tan, ["Lunch With Sumiko: Kindness is the greatest virtue, says Tommy Koh"](#), *The Straits Times*, 3 Dec 2017.

² Tommy Koh, *The Tommy Koh Reader: Favourite Essays and Lectures*, (Singapore: World Scientific, 2013), 517.

³ Koh, *Tommy Koh Reader*, 517.

⁴ Tan, "Lunch With Sumiko"; ["Singapore names another varsity don to the UN"](#), *The Straits Times*, 11 July 1968; Judith Holmberg, ["Judith gets a first"](#), *New Nation*, 5 April 1974.

⁵ ["Singapore names another varsity don to the UN"](#), *The Straits Times*, 11 July 1968.

⁶ Koh, *Tommy Koh reader*, 518.

⁷ Koh, *Tommy Koh reader*, 518.

⁸ ["Ambassador to return as High Court judge"](#), *The Straits Times*, 6 May 1984; Lay Hwee Yeo, Peggy Kek, Gillian Koh and Li Lin Chang (eds), *Tommy Koh: Serving Singapore and the world* (Singapore: World Scientific 2017), 37.

⁹ Yeo et al, *Serving Singapore*, 37-38.

¹⁰ Yeo et al, *Serving Singapore*, 19, 64.



When Koh returned from Washington in 1990, he was appointed Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He went on to serve as chairman and director of various organisations including the National Arts Council (founding chairman, 1991-1996), the Censorship Review Committee (1991-1992), Asia-Europe Foundation (founding executive director, 1997-2000), Institute of Policy Studies (1990-1997, 2000-2004), National heritage board (2002-2011), NUS Centre for International Law and Tembusu College (Rector).¹¹

Whilst leading the various organisations, Koh continued to serve Singapore diplomatically. He was the chief negotiator for the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, and the Agent of Singapore in two international cases: the 2003 land reclamation case heard at the International Tribunal on Laws of the Sea, and Pedra Branca at the International Court of Justice (2003-2007).¹²

Link to [*The Tommy Koh Law of the Sea Collection*](#)

Link to [*The Tommy Koh Earth Summit Collection*](#)

¹¹Yeo et al, *Serving Singapore*, 88, 107, 220, 524.

¹²Yeo et al, *Serving Singapore*, 250-251.