



# Focus on AGTA's New President, Magdelaine Wong

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AGTA's new President, Magdelaine Wong, was born in Penang, Malaysia, to second generation Chinese. She was the fourth in a family of five children. School in colonial Malaysia was a convent for girls run by Irish nuns with an all female teaching staff and "O" level examinations under the British system. One started school at the age of seven and left, hopefully with a GCE (General Certificate of Education) ten years later at seventeen. Then came two years of form six, in a co-educational senior school run by Christian Brothers. It was during those years that Magdelaine first "discovered" geography, the previous ten years a haze of memories that focused on English composition to the exclusion of anything else (her earliest recollection of anything resembling ambition was to write a novel!).

Magdelaine remembers well her geography teacher in Form 6 – a stocky, balding, middle-aged Chinese man with a sharp wit which he used sparingly during geography classes, preferring for most of the time, to write the assignment topic on the blackboard and subsequently retiring to his newspaper. Lower and upper 6th geography appeared to be an endless stream of assignments and visits to the library. In hindsight, the old gent probably believed he was using a discovery approach where his students discovered a love of geography (by default) in the process of hunting for information on some obscure topic. It was during those years that a fascination for the physical environment and landforms emerged, accompanied by a curiosity for distant lands which she did not believe she would ever visit – travel for her family meant crossing the channel on the ferry to visit relatives on the mainland.

The end of 1965 was momentous – Magdelaine was awarded a Colombo Plan scholarship to study for a BA (Hons) in geography at Otago University in New Zealand. Much to the credit of educators in Malaysia, Magdelaine knew where New Zealand was and had also learnt about sheep farming on the Canterbury Plains! Apart from physical geography, there had been much reading and learning in form six about the regional geography of Malaysia and its Asian and Pacific neighbours.

But not much about the people and their values – so the first year was spent accommodating different cultural perspectives. It was during her tertiary studies at Otago that Magdelaine made the transition from physical to human geography, focusing on urban geography for her dissertation. It was during those years that Magdelaine realised how badly her schooling with its emphasis on rote learning and unquestioning acceptance of knowledge, had prepared her for tertiary studies.

After five years in New Zealand (four years in Dunedin and one in Auckland) Magdelaine returned to Malaysia and found herself teaching geography in Sarawak, East Malaysia.

Migration to Brisbane followed in 1973. It was sad to leave family and friends behind and daunting to be going to a place where there wasn't a familiar face, no family, nor friend, nor a job. Conflict issues, of a socio-political nature, are common in senior geography courses. As are also development issues and their references to western cultural influences and the "brain drain" from "third world" countries. As one who had contributed to the "brain drain" from Malaysia, Magdelaine believes that geography teachers should be wary of simplistic solutions to complex issues – there is certainly more than one side to the story! Intercultural intersubjectivity (in every sense) is not for the faint-hearted.

It was 1977 when Magdelaine returned to full time teaching and started her acquaintance with the GTAQ. Since 1983 Magdelaine has served on GTAQ Council as Councillor, Secretary, Vice-President and most recently as President. In 1986 Magdelaine was elected to the AGTA executive as Secretary/Treasurer. On completion of the two-year term, Magdelaine was elected to AGTA Executive as Vice-President, a position she retained from 1988 to 1993. On the school front, Magdelaine co-ordinated geography at an inner suburban state high school from 1978–1985, worked as Subject Mistress from 1986–1989 and then was seconded to the Ministerial Consultative Council on Curriculum from 1990 to 1993. In 1984 Magdelaine completed an MSc in Science, Technology and Society through Griffith University focusing on Australia's aid program and its impact on developing countries for her thesis. She is

currently Deputy Principal at Dakabin State High School on the northern outskirts of Brisbane.

Magdelaine firmly believes in the value of geography to the education of students in schools. She also argues that geography, taught in the spirit of inquiry and encouragement of thinking, does indeed fulfil many community

expectations about schooling outcomes for young people in Australia (see, for example her paper on 'Geography and essential learnings' in Gerber, R. (Ed.) 1992 *Geography in society* published by RGSQ. Hence the debate for geography as core or essential part of the curriculum must take place within the context of the national agenda.