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Oral History Interview with Tan Teck Meng: Conceptualising SMU

Teck Meng TAN

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Tan Teck Meng

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 16 March 2010

Location: Singapore Management University, Li Ka Shing Library Recording Studio

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Note to Reader:

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Patricia Meyer: Today we are here with Tan Teck Meng, he'll be our narrator. I'm Patricia Meyer, the interviewer. It's Tuesday, 16th of March 2010 and we're making this recording at Singapore Management University, the Li Ka Shing Library recording studio.

The purpose of today's interview is to get Teck Meng's recollections and perspectives on the early days of SMU and the formation of the university.

I'd like to start by just taking a step back before you were even involved with the third university, could you just briefly tell us where you were?

Tan Teck Meng: Yes, taking a step back, I've been the dean of NTU [Nanyang Technological University] for eight years and to tell you the truth, I was so comfortable [there]. By the eighth year, you know, everything had been set up. We had thirty-five hundred students, we had some three hundred PhD faculty and at least another three hundred faculty and staff, so I was very comfortable. So I said, "Okay, take one more year, probably I will step down and let somebody take over." Then lo and behold, sometime in May 1996, Dr Tony Tan, DPM [Deputy Prime Minister], called for a meeting with the deans and the president, vice president, registrar of NTU—all the deans, including the engineering deans and, of course, including me, the business dean.

All the deans in NTU went for a meeting, not knowing what is going to happen. Then in the course of the discussion, Dr Tan mentions the establishment, his idea of an establishment of a business university. You know, I was leaping with joy, inside my heart. I said, "This is the best thing to happen in Singapore because everybody wants to study business in Singapore." And everything, plenty of students wanting to do business. [The] business school is full in the two universities, (laughter) NUS [National University of Singapore] and NTU and even SIM [Singapore Institute of Management] was very popular at that time. So I said, "This is great for Singapore," and I was really thrilled by the possibility.

So we discussed [it] and Dr Tony Tan then asked me, "Teck Meng, what do you think?" Without asking my president, I should do the right thing [and ask], "What do you think Dr Cham [Cham Tao Soon]?" [but] I did not. I just simply said, "That's the best thing to happen, I fully agree with it." And I could see from the corner of Dr Cham's eye, the president of NTU, looking at me— you know, this guy never talked to me—something of that sort. (laughter) So I looked at him, "Sorry, he's the DPM, you know, asking me a question, I will have to answer straight." So I totally agreed with it.

Where can you find that kind of opportunity? One, it's a business university, purely for business. At that time, we had a discussion, we also talked about law, we also talked about accountancy, we talked about all the businesses. And in my business school, in NTU, its huge and we had a lot of specialisation, like, for example, actuarial science, insurance, we had marketing, human resource, and it's a huge business school. So in itself, it's a university already. So I thought, "That's wonderful, it's a great thing to happen."

Patricia Meyer: So from the very early days, from May '96, the scope of this new university was

already...

Tan
Teck Meng: Business?

Tan
Teck Meng: That's the scope only, and also the idea was to shift all the business schools, to the new university. The whole idea is having a business school, and the other idea, which is of course, pre SMU, is to convert SIM into SIM university.

That's the initial strategy because SIM itself is very big so, that's a good, clever idea—use an established school and SIM had at that time the facilities and so on. We can all be put together there you see, so it is supposed to be a SIM university.

Patricia Meyer: And the first way that that third university was to be realised was to look at SIM and see how that programme could grow into a university?
How long did that examination and consideration [take]?

Tan
Teck Meng: The thinking was that since the two [existing] universities are three-year programmes, our third university wants to have four-year programme, where are we going to get our students? That's the worrying part, which was totally unnecessary. But like everything you start anew, you tend to be a bit careful, so we were still trying to cram the four-year programme into three, which we did in NTU. In NTU, we had a three-year programme, but it is also a broad-based university. Our business school is broad-based, so I wanted to do the same thing; I wanted very much here in SMU that we should have broad-based education. I think if we have too narrow an education, it's not going to be good for our students, nor is it going to be good for our business in future. So I wanted them to have science, I wanted them to have the humanities, we're talking fifteen years ago—it's like, this is not on.

Patricia Meyer: Where did you meet on Saturdays?

Tan
Teck Meng: Oh, we went to SIM. At that time we used their conference room. No place, so we were hunting for a place and asking [for] a piece of property and by that time, we already decided that we would have a small campus at Evans Road. I don't know whether you know it or not, Evans Road, the blue building. Opposite [it], there are these black and white houses and they are empty. So we got Ho Thim Seng to go and check with the URA [Urban Redevelopment Authority] to give [them to] us [and] they said you cannot use that for offices, it's for house. So we've been running around and then Ho Kwon Ping [had] his building in Upper Bukit Timah Road, asked, "How about using my office here?" Then I said, "Sure, but we'll pay rent." So even today he would say, "I rented [it out to] you all so cheap, you know," which is true. (laughter) It so happened, there's another building just nearby, and the bidding was quite low, so he's got no choice, he's got to follow the valuation. Anyway we managed to get in there. At the beginning, let

me tell you, we got no facilities. I'm the first employee, we got nothing there. We got no copier, we got no fax, nothing.

Patricia Meyer: A desk?

Tan
Teck Meng: Nearly no desk. (laughter) Fortunately, they had some old desks there so I managed to go in there. I always laugh [and say] we have to sit on the floor, almost literally sitting on the floor to work. But it was okay; [when] you're happy it's okay. You marry the right woman, you happy, anywhere you can.... (laughter) So that was a big thing.

That's right. So what I did was, I took my computer from my house. My wife has a business so all photocopying [was] done by her. (laughter) So we brought everything home, either to photocopy or to fax, back and forth. So that was a bit... [when] you talk about start-ups, starting a business, this is it. People don't realise, they think, "Wah, so easily done, already." No! A lot of hard work. You talk to my wife, my family, a lot of pain to go through—what [are] you going to do tomorrow—so that kind of thing. So facilities, that was a problem.

Patricia Meyer: I wanted to just find out a little bit more about the days, the first campus at Evans Road and the construction and you mentioned that you stayed near there. So what was that like, watching that progress?

Tan
Teck Meng: Oh I tell you, we only got six months, and I, even my wife [was] worried for me. Students [were] coming, where are we going to put the students? So every night, me, wife and dog, we walked, walked to the site to see and I tell you, at the beginning it's very frightening because they are all piling, right, and you see nothing. So the two of us [asked], "Where is the building?" They are all underground, and after the piling was done already, then when it comes up, it was very fast, very fast! Remarkable in six months, we got the building up—painted, we got chairs in, we even have our offices there.

Patricia Meyer: I see, okay. And if I can just back up a little bit, back to that period again, what did you find out on that trip? Did you already identify which US school that you hoped to collaborate with or work with?

Tan
Teck Meng: At that time I signed the document, it was about that time. We had a meeting and we decided that in order for our Singapore business school to be the top, top, top top-notch, we want to go for the top-notch US university, business school and Wharton is the best. And then they sent me on a trip to Wharton, and we [talked about] collaboration with Wharton, I think that's a godsend. Janice Bellace was quite happy, you know, and the president [Judith Rodin] of Wharton [should be University of Pennsylvania] was quite happy, so there was collaboration, which is very good for us. And once we start marketing [that] we collaborate with Wharton, the whole world is different. So, that was a good collaboration and I'm very happy that Wharton has been

very kind to us.

Patricia Meyer: You were mentioning that the initial idea was that the business schools at NUS and NTU would close or would be shifted? Yes, when was that clear that that wasn't going to happen?

Tan Teck Meng: SIM don't want to be a university. And then, NUS also don't want to come and they want to keep their business school. NTU decided later on that they will only give the business school; they will not give the accounting school. So the whole thing, [was] all totally different. The whole idea is put them all together, [but] now we created more schools.

Patricia Meyer: At one point the third university is thinking that it's going to be taking in these programmes from other schools as it's developing. Then it becomes apparent that it won't be getting those programmes. Was that a setback?

Tan Teck Meng: Initially as I look at it, it is a setback you see, because the press went to town, you know, on this new university. Then all of a sudden, this new university sounds like a small university. So initially, personally, as the lead person, I'm concerned because I took so many people with me, what happens if this thing fails? We [have] all got to go back and beg Dr Cham for a job. (laughter) So, yes I was concerned. But I knew something—number one, we are going to have a city university. Where on earth can you find a city university in a small country like Singapore? So expensive. So that's what the Government promised and Singapore Government is always true to their word—they want to do it, they do it, you see. So that comforted me. So I said, I think that's okay.

And people will come, it's quite interesting. Let me just relate the example, a student who was coming in the first batch, they had to fight with their father to come [to SMU]. The father wouldn't let them come, "No, this has no track record, you come to this university?" The student said, "What! I don't care; I want to come to this new university."

And we were very fortunate because these are the guys who were true pioneers; these are the guys who got the guts. We interviewed them and they are full of passion, "This is what I want to do." So we had our three hundred students I think at that time. The first batch that came in were very interesting students, very bold.

For example, a small university with three hundred people, we also participated in the university games, varsity games, so I was telling myself, "What games are we going to play? Three hundred [students], this fellow [university] got fifteen thousand students!" So we get them together, I said, "Let's don't be smart, okay? Let's go and pick one or two games, that's all, and we will just focus." So we got one judo fellow, he was a national champ or number two, whatever, so okay, "You enter." Then we had a canoeing team, they are very, very good, also the national team, so I said, "Let's just

have these two games, the rest don't want [to participate] and I will give you a prize if you all win." Both won prizes, one was second, one was third.

Then, the other part is that every year, the student union will go to the Istana to meet the Minister of Education for a dialogue. So what we did was, [with a] small team, you just got to train them. Then I said, "Look, think of what we want to ask and you all write it down and every time there's silence, SMU people must stand up there and the first question must come from an SMU student. No silence. Silence means you [need to] quickly stand up and ask [a question]." So we did make an impact, because they all knew, small university and every time they say "SMU", and I said, "You must say, say SMU loud, loud." (laughter) "I'm so and so from SMU," create a presence you see.

So all these little things, which now [when] you look back, "Ah, so simple," but you think about it, if you had not alerted them and the students are not brave, if they're all quiet then you're finished. So, these are things that we do to create that kind of environment for our students. I could even hear, because the two ministers there, I could hear one of the ministers talking to another SMU [student] and I was so happy. Then during the tea session, they [the students] will all stick together, I said, "No, you don't. You get out and make friends with all the ministers, all the big tycoons there."

Patricia Meyer: Parent's concerns?

Tan Teck Meng: Very concerned, I can tell you, ninety-nine percent concerned. They will come and speak to us—you sure you're a real university?—small little thing like that. So yes, we are for real, there's no doubt about that. I think the biggest blessing was that about a year ago, we met a parent over dinner. And the parent said, "My son, so and so,"—of course, I can't remember their name—"he definitely wanted to go to [SMU] university, I [was] so angry with him, but today I am so happy. You saved my son, you saved my son. You've done something different. I don't know what you all do." He said, "My son never wants to study, but with this university, he stays here [and] study all the time." And he's a multimillionaire [and] he wants the son to take over the company.

Patricia Meyer: What was the overall public reaction to this idea of a third university?

Tan Teck Meng: So I think the public reaction has been good. I must say that, and after the second, third batch we never have problems anymore.

They knew. We showed we delivered. I keep saying we must deliver, we must deliver. I know it's all fun here. Exam, exam is no fun. Take away the exam, fun, the exam part of it. Fun. We can have fun and study at the same time, "Why must you make education so miserable?" Let's enjoy it—that has always been my motto—let's enjoy it. A lot of kids enjoy it.

Patricia Meyer: The design of the campus?

Tan
Teck Meng: Ah, that's very interesting again. The design of the campus, I was deeply involved in the design of the campus. Of course our land is not together, right. It's separated by the church. So the design was a big challenge. So we, we had to have a consultant who to help us to work out how the design ought to be. We had a very interesting episode. Luckily, it did not happen. It's a British architect, very famous architect. He came up with a design that has a dome—there's a dome that covers the whole building here, the whole building—and I try to understand why. He said that it's good, because air will come from the ground and go up. Up, you know, and you can save aircon [air conditioning], you can save air conditioning cost. So I say, "Um, I think we have a problem because Singapore has hot air up there, hot air down here. You going to bring hot air [in], we will all burn to death." But he was so convinced that this is it. So he brought me to London, then we went to see [and] London and Cambridge has a building like that. And it's cool, no doubt, cool. I say of course, England, you don't need to do that, it's cool also. (laughter)

Then we had another US architect, very clever this fellow. So he came up with a lot of designs, a lot of the facilities was also done by him. And, you know, lo and behold, our accountants also did a lot of contribution towards the design, you know that? This team of the initial nine of us, we do the impossible, we design the interior and get it going. It's just fantastic. Will I live this life again? Yes, not bad, quite interesting.

Patricia Meyer: I wanted to ask you about two other aspects of SMU that distinguish it. One is it's a private university, can you talk about that?

Tan
Teck Meng: Yes, right. Even at our first meeting with Dr Tony Tan, he suggested that this will be a private university. So I said, "Private university? Where are we going to get the money?" because running a university is very costly, but it will be a government-funded private university. When I go to the US [and] talk about this, they say, "What's this? Harvard, MIT, they are all private universities, where on earth you got government-funded private university?" So the concept has flown through and Government, true to their promise, gave the money to us so that we will run privately as a university. I think there is no way we can run a truly private university yet, not yet. But if Government is backing us, eventually [when] we do so well, hopefully our alumni can donate. Eventually we hope that we can be a private, proper private university, be able to contribute to the economy. So that's, that's one thing which is very unique. In fact, that was some bit of worry on my part also you see. Because what if the Government says, "Okay, no money already." So what are we going to do? Those were early days, but now, no problem. Government has been funding us very well.

Patricia Meyer: Another key decision was to have a research university, how did that come about?

Tan
Teck Meng: When we decided to work with Wharton, as you know Wharton has very strong research standing, so that becomes a good opportunity. Plus we were only hiring PhD

from mostly from Ivy League schools and top schools—to attract these people, you don't have good research, they won't come. So we need to work on having professors [and] researchers who want to come to do research here.

Patricia Meyer: An environment for them.

Tan Teck Meng: Yes, we got to create an environment, so we have the Wharton-SMU, Wharton Research Centre. That was the first centre that we started. So we need to give them the environment to work, you see. No point talk, talk, talk, talk, they come here, they can't do anything. So we fund them, fund them, we give them a critical mass so that they can work together, plus trying to link with other universities and people. So the research environment has been very good. In a short ten years, we have done very well.

Patricia Meyer: I would agree with that. That leads into, in these ten years, what breakthroughs or significant milestones do you see looking back over the first ten years of the university?

Tan Teck Meng: One, we have done well in research. If you look at the...our young PhD [faculty], they've been publishing and recognised, I think that's important. We have sent, quite a lot to the US and did their PhDs and came back and [are] doing well. Also the student population has grown, that's a good measurement. The people are interested to come to our university. Also exchange, our exchange students have been a lot, quite a lot, our signing of agreements, to have exchange with universities has been tremendous, has been tremendous. So this helps to build your reputation. Foreign students are coming in, not only [on] exchange but really coming in to be [full-time] students.

Patricia Meyer: When you look onwards, down the road, what do you think would be the challenges that this university will face in the next couple of decades, going forward?

Tan Teck Meng: I think our challenge has always been competing with our [other] two universities and top universities elsewhere. I think we should build our people, our own students, our curriculum, our pedagogy. We build confidence in our students that they are able to stand up and talk. Very few Singapore students can do that. So you talk to friends outside, you're from SMU, "I like your SMU students, they can just stand up and talk." Maybe they talk too much but they can talk, better than not talking at all. So our training has been excellent, forty-eight subjects, every subject they log one hour, so you give them the confidence, you build the confidence. So the way I see it, our students will eventually become top leaders here, because you cannot lead if you cannot talk. So right from the beginning, this is what I will do; every course there must be a presentation, right, to build confidence.

Patricia Meyer: Being part of this new university, how did it impact you?

Tan Teck Meng: I worked too hard. (laughter) No, I think it impacts me in the sense that, you know, certain joy, you can't describe. It is like, "What a challenge! What an opportunity!" Not only to me, but it's to the community, to all the people that come here. We all benefit from it, not only me. My children benefit from it, like my son benefits from it because it's an opportunity. And I always tell my staff, whatever we do, we do well, okay. Let's do well because [when] you do well, you contribute to the community; you never know when you are contributing to yourself. So it's a real joy to do it.

Patricia Meyer: I'd like to take this part to ask you about the teaching that you did at SMU. I've heard some stories about the bidding system and your classes. Can you tell us more about that?

Tan Teck Meng: After I left administration, I went into teaching and surprisingly I managed to survive quite well. So we have student evaluations and I am only entitled to be considered for an award after three years. So the first three years, I got the best teaching, teacher's award and then subsequently I got to stop for one year because I must give another person a chance. Subsequently I won again. Give another person a chance, I won again. So I won three. It was very gratifying. So after winning three, they put me into so called 'The Hall of Fame', teaching fame. So I haven't seen my hall of fame yet. So yes, I think that's good, the students appreciated it.

Patricia Meyer: Any advice you would like to give to the SMU students today, and to the SMU graduates?

Tan Teck Meng: Sure, I think that whatever you do, whatever you do, do the best, do your best, you give your best and people will appreciate it. It take time sometimes but people will appreciate that you did your best and I always tell my students also and I say, "Wherever you are, do the best you can." Okay, because if you don't, people will know. Do your best, even if you're not very good at it, but people know that you have given your best. Nobody will blame you. Sometimes people are so clever but they are not going to do their best. It's not appreciated. So I want to bless my students, which runs in the thousands, okay, all over the world that they will continue to do well. Be proud of themselves and be proud of their country, okay. Thank you.

Patricia Meyer: Thank you.

End of Interview

Acronyms List

| Acronym | Definition |
|---------|---------------------------------------|
| BBM | Bintang Bakti Masyarakat |
| BBM | Bachelor of Business Management |
| CFO | Chief Financial Officer |
| CV | Curriculum Vitae |
| DPM | Deputy Prime Minister |
| MIT | Massachusetts Institute of Technology |
| NAFA | Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts |
| NTI | Nanyang Technological Institute |
| NTU | Nanyang Technological University |
| NUS | National University of Singapore |
| SIM | Singapore Institute of Management |
| SMU | Singapore Management University |
| UCLA | University of California Los Angeles |
| URA | Urban Redevelopment Authority |
| US | United States |