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Oral History Interview with Tan Chin Tiong: Conceptualising SMU

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Tan Chin Tiong

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 07 December 2010

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

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Patricia Meyer: I'm Pat Meyer. Today is Tuesday, 7th December 2010 and I will be speaking with Tan Chin Tiong for the 'Conceptualising SMU' oral history project. We are meeting in the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library at Singapore Management University and the subject of the recording is your recollections and perspectives on the formation and early days of SMU [Singapore Management University] and your role as provost and deputy president.

I would like to just start by asking you to step back and tell us where you were in your career before you became involved with the third university.

Tan Chin Tiong: As you probably know, I had always been with NUS [National University of Singapore] and I'm doing reasonably well and out of the blue, I was called to be in the committee that will look into the creation of the third university. And it was interesting how this whole thing was concocted. You probably would have known by now, it was done all through the initiative of Dr Tony Tan. He was then the deputy prime minister. He looked at the landscape, and he recognised a few things. First, there is a need for a third university. NUS and NTU [Nanyang Technological University] at that juncture they were more [focused on] teaching than research but the game plan was to evolve them into research universities. And there needed to be a teaching university for Singapore. If you look at almost the third university at that juncture, it had turned out to be the Singapore Institute of Management. They run a lot of programmes in collaboration with universities, and by and large their programs, I would say ninety-five percent, ninety-nine percent, are all in business. So Tony Tan looked at SIM [Singapore Institute of Management] as a potential candidate to evolve into a university. So what he did was, he came into the picture, he replaced the entire [SIM] council. Ho Kwon Ping was brought in as the new chairman and business people were largely constituted as the council members and Tan Teck Meng came in as the nominee from NTU and I came in as the nominee from NUS.

The original plan was to have this committee work on a concept paper [on] how to evolve SIM into a university. John [John Yip] was then the CEO [Chief Executive Officer] of SIM, so he was very much involved. And SIM, the large portfolio of its programmes at that point were diplomas, and so this new university logically would be a feeder for a lot of the diploma kids, the poly [polytechnic] kids and whatever else. And after thinking through, debates, dialogues, and so on and so forth, the concept paper was put in place and it was submitted to the Government, and the Government approved that. The concept paper or the council's decision at that point was SIM had a role to play. It should continue to be SIM but the Singapore Government should create a third university, and this was where SMU came into the picture which means a new university will be created.

Patricia Meyer: Separately.

Tan Chin Tiong: Separately, but affiliated. And the original concept plan was to take over NTU

School of Business which includes the accounting component.

Tan Chin Tiong: The creation of the university—the concept plan—was for a fifteen thousand-student-strength university, and it was meant to be a big teaching university and largely a business management-type university. As you know, NTU had for a long time been the largest business programme in Singapore. So when you migrate it, port it over, immediately it would have a couple of thousands of kids, faculty. Then you can grow and expand from that base. Ho Kwon Ping at that juncture was looking for a president and they appointed the headhunter. He was in conversation with Janice Bellace, and he suggested maybe Janice should be the person. Janice agreed, so that's how Janice came into the picture very early on.

Patricia Meyer: The idea of the research centre came about from a few discussions.

Tan Chin Tiong: So the original plan is not supposed to be a research university. So the moment Janice became the president, she looked at the fifteen thousand student strength, she said that this is not going to fly. And this whole relationship with NTU is [also] not going to fly. At that time there were just a few of us involved, so the discussions went along, and basically, there was a lot of debate on what we should do and what we should not do, so on and so forth. The decision at that juncture was that we should be on our own. We should develop our own faculty, doing everything from ground up and as a result a fifteen thousand-size university is not going to fly so the number was cut down from fifteen to six. But if you look at the whole notion of Janice coming into the picture, it had also created a new template, moving forward. What that means is that we will now follow more the Wharton model, which in fact was what Tony Tan wanted. He wanted this university to be a more American-style university compared to say the more British system of the NTU and NUS, at least at that juncture. And so this will differentiate SMU from the other two. And the Wharton connection, the Wharton relationship, actually gave us that. So when we first started—it was literally we borrowed—we followed whatever Wharton and Penn uses, we use.

Patricia Meyer: Can I ask, as the plan is developing and changing, and say the student numbers are being scaled down to six thousand, how was that communicated to the Government? How did the team work with the Government?

Tan Chin Tiong: Before we even go to that stage, when the concept paper was accepted by MOE [Ministry of Education], basically we need to start the ball rolling, and we need to go to work and it was at that juncture that Ho Kwon Ping, locked in a few players to get the university going. So at that juncture, [it was] Teck Meng, myself and Aik Meng [Low Aik Meng], we were the first three.

Patricia Meyer: To just look at how SMU was going to be set up and governed, why was it important to have it a private university?

Tan Chin Tiong: A lot of the early decisions, from the Government's perspective, it was Tony Tan is a visionary DPM [deputy prime minister] at the juncture.

NTU and NUS, they were constituted more like a statutory board. Statutory boards are entities created within the ministry, so they have a direct line from MOE. So the decision to put SMU as a private university was that we will be outside of MOE. We are not a stat board [statutory board], so we are not inside the ministry. The moment you are outside, there is no direct line. There is only a dotted line. So we can do things faster, we can move along quicker and we were pretty dramatic. We were doing many things very different.

If we had been inside, we would not have been able to pay salaries that are totally different from NUS and NTU. Remember in your old days when we first started, NUS and NTU, the faculty remuneration packages were very much in line with the civil service. So we were incorporated like a private entity, legally we are on our own. So whatever we want to do, the Government can, well, influence some, but they cannot say no. So we were adopting, at that point, a lot of policies that were very strange to Singapore

Patricia Meyer: What were the challenges of attracting faculty from the US to this new university?

Tan Chin Tiong: Basically, we talked to industry folks [about] what are the good things of local grads [graduates], what are the not-so-good things of local grads. Before the creation of each school, we talked to industry people. And for the case of SIS, a lot of the industry folks told us, "Don't bother to go down the road of computer science. You can't compete with the Indians; you can't compete with the Chinese. So if you want to do IT, do something that is more relevant to business. Marry IT with business. That is something that is needed by the industry." So, before we created the business school of SMU, we also talked to people. And we constantly hear the fact that, "Hey, the local grads from NUS and NTU are very strong technically, they know the content, they know the subjects, they know how to do things, their technical competency is very high, but they lack confidence, they are not as articulate, they don't speak naturally, they don't ask questions, they are passive." So some of these attributes, we reckon we need to fix.

If we are going to be competitive we need to differentiate SMU from the other two. We have to do things they are not able to offer. So it became natural that we should adopt the more MBA pedagogy in the classroom. So, as you can see, the way we design the whole SMU infrastructure, there is no lecture theatre. Everything is the MBA-style classroom. Some flat, but mostly multi-tiered. The whole agenda was, "Let's bring MBA teaching pedagogy into the undergraduate curriculum." And as a result, every kid would carry with her or him, the name tag. The professor's role is to facilitate, is to get the kids to talk. Now along the way, some of the faculty are not so adequate in facilitating, they end up prescribing projects—because when you have projects, the kids would talk, the kids would interact and so on so forth. So projects became a natural add-on as a result of this interactive pedagogy. And [for] some of the disciplines, interaction tends to be lesser. So from very early on, there was this

requirement that we want every course to have interaction, whether it is statistics or English or whatever else. So the interactive pedagogy, the small classroom was all by design from the outset. One thing to strengthen the confidence, the interactive, the speaking competencies of the kids. And it works. Yes, after four years of talking in class, it comes naturally to them, second nature to them.

Patricia Meyer: I would like to look at, as you're developing the university, how did you go about presenting it to Singapore and to the world?

Tan Chin Tiong: The initial years, especially year one, it was a bit of a challenge. We had to do a lot of marketing. Every year, there is this big do whereby we recruit the A-level and poly [polytechnic] students. And we did the same thing like NUS and NTU, we go to the career education fair. We have slots whereby we make presentations and the question is, "Why do I need to go to you when I can go to NTU and NUS, or I can go overseas?" It was a challenge. But I think from day one, the kids were excited by the fact that we are offering an option, an alternative to them, a more American-style business education—whereas, the conventional wisdom of the British-style education is that very early on, you have to specialise in a discipline. So one of the attractions, I think, for a lot of kids is that, you have a general education, you have the flexibility to do non-business subjects from very early on. This more American template actually turned on quite a few kids. So we received two thousand applicants for the first round, of which we took in three hundred.

Patricia Meyer: And the media, you had a press conference with the media and ad campaigns? That was another difference?

Tan Chin Tiong: Well, when we came in, we were unknown. So, how else can you tell the whole world about this new university but to go to the advertising campaign? And at that juncture, some ten years ago, most of the ads on education tend to be very boring. That would be the traditional ad coming from an educational institution. We reckon we are not going to be able to do the same to gain the attention of the public. So we decided to take a more colourful approach. We decided to have a colour ad and a more corporate ad to tell the whole world what we are, who we are, that kind of thing—there is this new institution. So year one, year two, the ad copies were pretty ordinary. But then the numbers that we needed for our first batch and second batches tend to be small, so it is ok. We get the number. And from day one, we had been very selective.

What was interesting was the moment we started, our kids—because of the pedagogy, because of the selection, because of whatever that is happening—tend to be a lot more articulate. And I still remember I was on a trip with Tony Tan and that was two years after we started. And at dinner, he said that, "Hey, at the Istana,"—every year, the Government, the Prime Minister, and so on, would invite student leaders from the universities to the Istana for a garden party, tea session and that kind of thing—he said that the Prime Minister asked him, "Why are SMU

kids so different from the other kids?" He said that they are more confident, they would approach him, they will ask questions and they pretty much dominate the discussion. So he asked me why. I said, "It could be our selection, it could be our pedagogy and it could be the fact that, we make them talk in class." And he said that apparently your kids did very well at the Istana party. And again, from all the interactions with business people, from politicians, they consistently tell us that our kids are different. So we decided to use this as an ad campaign. We went out and said: SMU kids are different. So that advertising campaign did not come from us. None of us could have gotten the campaign right. It came from people from the ground.

So, we have jumping girls, we have jumping boys and that became almost like the classic. And subsequently, I think a year later, we adopted the 'I Love SMU' campaign. That again didn't come from us. It came from the kids. The president and myself, as provost, every month, we have lunch with the students. Since day one, we've been doing that. And from a lot of interactions with the students, often we hear the kids telling us they love going back to school at SMU. They say, "Hey, I want to go back to school. I love SMU." So enough of them told us they love SMU, we said, make it into a campaign. So that became a campaign. [laughter] So all these ideas didn't come from any of us, it didn't come from the ad agency. So that was the interesting thing.

Patricia Meyer: Looking at how you built up the academic community, how did you develop that?

Tan Chin Tiong:

This is one of the few countries, whereby private universities have got a bigger reputation than public universities. Your top schools are typically your Harvard, your Yale, your Stanford, MIT, these are all private universities. In most of the Commonwealth countries—almost all the good universities are state universities. In a lot of the Asian countries—the top schools are all public. So when we were constituted as a private university, yes, we are allowed to do things creatively, we are not bounded by this bureaucracy of the ministry—but then when you go out and tell the kids that you are private, the kids say, "What is private? Private, does it mean that you are Informatics? [Singapore Informatics]. Private, does it mean that you are one of the private educational providers? Private, does it mean that you are not controlled by the Government?" As you know, the education space in the private sector is bizarre. Some good, some not so good, some very bad. So, are you in that category of private education providers? Of course, our typical response is "No, we are public. We are public and yet we are private." And that is a very confusing concept. So, for a long time, we need to educate people that we are supported by MOE, we are state-funded but we are private because we can do things outside of the bureaucracy. So, that is how we define it. And I think, over time people have gotten used to that concept.

However, if you go overseas, like to an education fair and so on and talk to kids and their parents—[the perception is] Singapore has a very strong brand name, the state, the public sector, Singapore Government—so overseas, Singapore Government-related is good. If you are a university, you are part of the Government

machinery that is good. The confidence level goes up, the kids and parents will be more prepared to send the kids to the school when they know that this is a Singapore Government university. So when you are private, again there are all kinds of questions. "Are you legitimate? Are you like some of the private players?" So it is a double-edged sword in some sense. But we have overcome that, because the model of SMU became so successful.

The Government, as you know, a few years back decided to make NUS, NTU similar to SMU. So basically, they changed the constitution. NUS and NTU also became what SMU is like. So, they are no longer statutory boards. They are now also, legally constituted as a private entity. They have the same governance structure like SMU. The moment the Government put that in place, all three universities are now on a level playing field. We are now state-funded autonomous universities. So today, if you are in the Ministry of Education, you will always hear this AU concept. AU means autonomous universities, it is not private, it is autonomous. We have some independence. It is like an autonomous school in the Ministry of Education sense. We are a little bit like that, funded by the Government. So the dotted line becomes a dark dotted line. [laughter] As a result of this fairly recent event, SMU probably had lost some of its independence from the very, very early days. However, we are now part of the so-called state system of which it includes NUS, NTU and SMU. We are now state universities, period. The private university part only lasted for a few years.

Patricia Meyer: And the Wharton-SMU Research Centre, how was that a help in the early days?

Tan Chin Tiong: It allowed us to bring in, on a regular basis, Wharton faculty and it also allowed our faculty to work with Wharton faculty. So they come together, they proposed research ideas and they would work as collaborators. And so it is funding for Wharton faculty to come out to Singapore to work with our faculty and it is an incentive. And also part and parcel of this is to get them exposed to SMU so that the hope was that some of them will come back on a regular basis and, I think, the concept was useful. It also gives us that branding angle, you know in SMU there is this Wharton thing.

Patricia Meyer: As it is coming up to the first day of SMU and the opening of the business school, as provost, were there any special concerns or issues you had?

Tan Chin Tiong: The interesting thing about SMU was our students had always been the strength of SMU. We are able to get quality students and we are able, over four years, mould them, evolve them, shape them into somewhat different human beings, I would say. I think largely because of the fact that we insist on many things that you don't typically get at NUS and NTU. You know the mandatory internship is one, and many kids do multiple rounds of internships. The mandatory voluntary service is another one. And we find a lot of kids after doing two weeks of voluntary work, they enjoy

doing voluntary work and many of them had gone back for more. You know the four years of education is something that we strongly emphasised. The fact that you have four years education, you are able to clock in many interesting times. So our kids, after four years, have more impressive looking CVs. So, yes, the fact that they are more confident, they can talk, those are value-add. I think, before they even do anything, they have a better-looking CV than many of the kids graduating from other universities. Because you have four years and because we push them out. Things like fifty percent of them would have spent a period of their life outside of Singapore, is something that we push very hard on. Isabel [Isabel Malique-Park, Director at the Office of International Relations] from day one, has been out there knocking on doors. And very early on, who would want to have a partnership with you on exchange? You are unknown. So it was tough. But over the years, we probably now have something like three hundred-over universities. What that means is that, our kids can literally go to anywhere in the world as exchange students. And if you look at the so-called study missions and every year, annually, we probably have ten to fifteen of those kids [who] can go to those things, our kids spend a lot of time outside of Singapore. That again, shape and evolve them into very different human beings. And we've heard from parents, you know, coming to SMU has changed their kids. So I think that is the major value-add.

Patricia Meyer: As the university is opened, new schools are announced every year. Can you tell us how that happened? The sequence of schools, how they came to be opened in that order?

Tan Chin Tiong: Well, for business school's spin-off to accounting school, it is a natural thing. The spinning off of accountancy school is due to two things. First the professional requirement, the degree programme needs to be a little bit different from the more general education kind of thing. So that was the main driver to spin-off, to have the accountancy school as a separate entity.

Business school [faculty] because we are recruiting from overseas tend to be more the research type whereby the accountancy group tend to be more the practice type. The practice type fits in very well with the local professional requirements, so to make it as a separate school became a natural thing. And after accountancy, econs [economics] is a natural spin-off and as you can see, a lot of the original team tend to be economists and having an econs school is a natural thing. The original concept was econs will then become the bed for social sciences, so we have a cluster. And so you have business, you have accounting, you have econs and IT came later because IT again, the intermarriage of IT and business turns out to be a very interesting and good one. And the original concept for School of Social Sciences was meant to be together [with economics].

Tan Chin Tiong: From day one we wanted to have law, so that was natural, but then it turned out to be almost the last one in this whole entrée of things. Because law you need to go through a lot of governmental bureaucracy to get it, okay. When it was time to have the law school, the original plan was to have JD [Juris Doctor] just like the

American-style law school. But then the local requirements on the ground—if you talk to people they would tell you that JD is something new, JD is not fully understood—why do you have to have a postgraduate school in law and not at the undergraduate level? So there are a lot of pros and cons. So the decision was to go with the undergraduate law, but then we have a broader-based law content than NUS. NUS is a very British law school and the bulk of the content is in law. For SMU when we first put it together, it was a lot more liberal arts-oriented and today it is about seventy percent which is fine.

Patricia Meyer: Just looking back over twelve years or so since you joined SMU, what do you see as significant about what SMU has done?

Tan Chin Tiong: I think SMU was definitely a major, major change agent for the education landscape. You know before SMU, the university landscape—or at least in the business school sense—tends to be, maybe a little bit complacent. You know, we had been doing more of the same for a long time. It is doing fine, there's nothing wrong with it. But the education space has so many new things and so many new happenings out there and I think SMU had brought a new model into the landscape. We have brought in a more US model. We have brought in a lot of practices, a lot of new norms into the space. And very quickly, as you know, NUS and NTU followed. SMU must have played a significant role in re-garnishing the new energy to do new things, to move forward. So in that sense, I think SMU as an institution, had created, had injected new energy and new life into the space.

Patricia Meyer: Looking to the future, how could SMU continue to differentiate itself? Do you think it can?

Tan Chin Tiong: I think SMU had done very well. We need to be conscious of the fact that some of these attributes that make SMU successful, we must make sure that we keep them and do them, polish them, refine them and improve on them. And a lot of the things that we have done like, we have the broad parameters, we have created an environment, an infrastructure that is uniquely SMU and we can continue to do that. So SMU needs to be conscious of the fact that what makes us successful and make sure we continue to do more of that, and what else can make SMU stronger, we need to incorporate them.

Patricia Meyer: Can you just look back and say what might have been one of your most interesting or most memorable moments for your time at SMU?

Tan Chin Tiong: I would say the whole time, you know, the ten years at SMU had been interesting. And it's very different from what I used to do. I was an administrator at NUS, but it is very different. Starting a new entity is very different from working as an administrator in a big organisation. And the journey had been fun.

Patricia Meyer: How did it affect you or change you or impact you?

Tan Chin Tiong: But in SMU as an administrator, I don't look at myself as an administrator,

Patricia Meyer: How do you see yourself?

Tan Chin Tiong: I look at myself as working together with a group of people doing new things. There always new things and as a provost or deputy president, I worked with all the presidents and they are all very different personalities. The Janice, the Ron Frank to Woody, they are all very different in their own right and it's been fun.

Patricia Meyer: Any advice for SMU students?

Tan Chin Tiong: I think the greatest part of SMU is the students, without a doubt. I think our kids are the best thing about SMU. And you see them being transformed. You see them doing very well and I do run across them, you know, in various forums, different platforms and they all have done very well. It's just amazing. For a young university, our kids can do so well in the industry, it is actually quite mind-boggling.

End of Interview

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
A-level	General Certificate of Education Advanced Level
AU	Autonomous University
CIA	Culinary Institute of America
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DPM	Deputy Prime Minister
EDB	Economic Development Board
IAAP	International Academic Advisory Panel
IR	Integrated Resort
JC	Junior College
JD	Juris Doctor
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MICA	Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOM	Ministry of Manpower
MRT	Mass Rapid Transit
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
SIAT	Singapore Institute of Applied Technology
SIM	Singapore Institute of Management
SIT	Singapore Institute of Technology
SMRT	Singapore Mass Rapid Transit
SMU	Singapore Management University
SUTD	Singapore University of Technology and Design
UK	United Kingdom
URA	Urban Redevelopment Authority
US	United States