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Oral History Interview with John Yip Soon Kwong: Conceptualising SMU

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: John Yip

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 01 November 2010

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

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Pat Meyer: I'm Pat Meyer. Today I will be speaking with John Yip on the 'Conceptualizing SMU' oral history project. Today is Monday, 1st of November 2010, and we're meeting at the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library at SMU. And the subject of today's recording is your recollection and your perspective on the formation of SMU. I'd like to start by going back to the time when you were at the Ministry of Education and just ask you to give us a brief summary of your roles and responsibility there.

John Yip: I was a Director of Education for the last ten years of my service with the Ministry of Education. I started out as a teacher, became a principal and did various portfolios at the Ministry of Education, from curriculum development to personnel work and so on. I spent the last ten years as Director of Education, looking after the professional aspects of teaching and learning, particularly at the Primary and Secondary levels. Of course, there is also involvement with polytechnics, the ITE, as well as the universities.

Pat Meyer: What were some of the ideas that were being discussed in the 1990s, regarding the future needs of education, particularly tertiary education here?

John Yip: At the time I left the Ministry, the school education system was well in place, in terms of providing opportunities for kids of differing abilities to pursue their education in areas of interest to them or in areas of their strength. But as far as the tertiary level is concerned, I think there was a dearth of places at the formal level in terms of what was being provided by the Ministry of Education for university education. In terms of vocational and technical training, adequate provision was made through polytechnics and through Institutes of Technical Education. So the academic side, the vocational side, and the skills training side, that's been well looked after. In the university sector, I would say it's also well looked after, but the participation rate was pretty low and there was a need, really, to try to increase the participation rate at the university level because children are getting more ambitious, they want to go to university and I think government was well aware of that sector. At the same time, there were many private education providers, outside the Ministry providing education for adults but that's for the adult sector but not for school leavers. And therefore there was a need, perhaps to rethink as to how best to provide for more places for school leavers.

Pat Meyer: What led to the idea of expanding finance, business management education in Singapore? How did that idea work for the creation of that new university?

John Yip: Singapore has always been a service sector and management is important, crucial. In fact Singapore Institute of Management was set up to help train middle level managers in the early days of industrialisation. And of course, having a diploma wasn't enough, one needed to look at other areas and strengthen their own skills, in management practices. As a result, the two universities then, NTU and NUS provided undergraduate studies in business. Although at that time, many schools overseas were already reducing undergraduate intake and doing more postgraduate work but

for Singapore, it was logical that we started with more undergraduate work and moving slowly to postgraduate work. So both NUS and NTU were already offering courses in business and accountancy.

Pat Meyer: And while you were at the Ministry of Education, what was your role in the discussions for the third university project.

John Yip: The universities have always had their independence so Ministry would only have sort of a guiding role in terms of providing funding, of requesting them on the number of students to take in, because the number of students, intake per year at the university was always controlled by what we called the CPTe figures. There's a Council for Professional and Technical Education and they provided figures for intake and projecting them forward as to the number of people in different disciplines required for the economy.

Pat Meyer: So as there was increased demand for tertiary education, the decision is made *not* just to expand slots in existing unis [universities] but to try to create a third university?

John Yip: There was talk even when I was at the Ministry towards my last one or two years there, of increasing the participation rate. And it was only logical that the government should start a third university. All these would be in addition to what would be available to working adults in the private education sector, outside the Ministry of Education, for example, at the Singapore Institute of Management.

Pat Meyer: As the discussions for the third university are taking shape, is there also input from the private sector or industry, other parts of the government in what's needed for this university?

John Yip: We did talk to different people and the Singapore Institute of Management Governing Council, we had people from different industries and they would be able to give inputs. Because when we started, when we were discussing the possibility of a third university, which is actually Singapore Management University, SMU, it was Government who decided that SIM should look into this aspect of turning, of evolving itself into a third university. Of course subsequently, after the university was set up with help from SIM, SIM remained as SIM to my delight!

Pat Meyer: Can you tell us how did you make the transition to SIM and who approached you and what was your initial responsibilities there?

John Yip: I was retiring at the end of December 1996 and I was approached by an HR firm, whether I would like to be the Executive Director of SIM after the previous director left.

It took awhile to decide whether I should really take on the job but I was very interested in adult education, or further education for working adults. I was very passionate about the fact that there were people out there who had no opportunities for further education. So after some consideration I met with the Governing Council then, was interviewed by the Governing Council then. They asked me about my ideas and subsequently they said they would take me on and that's how it went. I was very happy to be able go to SIM and continue to look at education but this time education for working adults.

Pat Meyer: When you started your new role at SIM in January 1997, what were you doing then and when was the idea for SIM expanding or changing into a third university? When did that come about?

John Yip: I joined SIM in January, January 1st or January 2nd 1997. I was trying to get myself familiar with the place. Then there was a talk given by Dr. Tony Tan, Deputy Prime Minister then, on the expansion of more tertiary education opportunities in January. And subsequently in either February or March, he visited SIM and he popped the question whether SIM would be an ideal instrument for starting a third university. That came as a surprise to me. After all, I was only two, three months on the job, and although SIM has been, had been there for 30 odd years, my initial reaction was, "Yes that would be a good sort of a seed organization to start a third university although perhaps a university [that] could take a different form and different shape." So that was my response to him and we talked about various possibilities. Then subsequently, we had our annual general meeting in April and he attended the annual general meeting, Tony Tan. And he actually spoke to the general body and suggested the possibility of SIM evolving into a third university because for SIM to evolve into third university we had to get the general body's agreement. And of course the general body after discussion, hearing Dr. Tan's views, approved the setting up of, approved the evolution of SIM into a third university. At the same annual general meeting, new council members were appointed and that included Mr Ho Kwon Ping who is now your Chairman of the Board of Trustees. So in that sense, we had a new Council which comprised Mr Ho Kwon Ping and others, one representative of the Ministry who was Mr Tharman who is now the Minister for Finance, and he was once the Minister for Education. I had actually worked with Mr Tharman when I was in the Ministry. So he knew the kinds of things that needed to be done. And we also had different people from various sectors from industry to contribute as we progressed this idea of evolving SIM into a third university.

Pat Meyer: So for the institution itself, for SIM, did it experience any major change there in 1997? Were there any changes to it or was most of it in discussions?

John Yip: We continued what we did. There was of course a lot of activity and a lot of excitement as to what's going to happen to us, the staff. But we managed that, we managed that quite well. At the same time, I myself was having second thoughts as to whether or not SIM should really drop its role at helping working adults get a degree

and concentrate on just [being] a university for school leavers. I had my doubts. And I actually expressed these doubts to the council. Ho Kwon Ping is the Chairman, the Chairman is elected among the Council members, you know. So he was appointed Council member, appointed Chairman.

As I gave my views, I also said I would be writing a paper, getting views from different people on the concept of a third university, which I did and subsequently I submitted this to council in the early part of September. While we discussed it at the Council meeting, Dr. Tony Tan also joined us for some meetings, at least one meeting in June, so we could tap his ideas as to what he saw as a third university. And we had a lot of discussions, with different people and how to ensure that the university would function well and would be a good working model for a third university. Whether we should move away from the British system to the American system or have some elements of both. So we had a sort of mission to visit some universities and Professor Tan Teck Meng and I visited some universities in the States and in UK, notably Wharton [and] Haas School in California, London Business School and the LSE [London School of Economics]. We visited these four institutions, we looked at curricular, we looked at how universities were being run and we put up a report to the Council.

Pat Meyer: And when that report was submitted, what ideas were in that report? What were your recommendations?

John Yip: Having been the scribe of the report, I could put things there that I want to see happen, you know. Things like an American system, or American-based system, not just in terms of curricula or broad-based curriculum, first two years what you do, various subjects, and to focus on main areas in the third and fourth year, unlike the British system which is specialised whereas American system is broad based.

I also wanted to see the nomenclature of staff change. As you know in the British system they are known as assistant lecturer, lecturers before they become senior lecturers, before they become associate professors and professors. And I know well that in my discussion with the universities and in Penn and elsewhere that the people there did not know what a lecturer was. After all it's a very British term, lecturer or senior lecturer. So if we wanted an American-based system, we had to ensure that we use an American-based nomenclature for staff. So I recommended that we should have assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, chair professors and what have you.

At the same time, I was really keen that we shouldn't have a mega campus. And that was in my discussion with Dr. Tan. He also agreed that we shouldn't have a mega campus like the NUS or the NTU. We should have a city campus. And the idea of city campus arose from the fact that I saw it working very well at LSE because it would create synergy with the city and you are in the midst of the activities, rather than to be in an ivory tower of your own. So that was how we should have a city campus.

So this are some of the ideas that we brought and we said that if we were to be

American-based system then we should try to get an American university, a good one, to link up with the proposed university, to set up some kind of consultancy service. And at that time there was one professor from Wharton who was teaching part time at the National University of Singapore, NUS, by the name of Richard Herring, and I had some discussions with him as to whether or not he would see the possibility of the new university linking up with Wharton. And he said that could be explored. And in my visits to UPenn, for the six nation project, I took the opportunity to visit Wharton as well. And these ideas came up. And so there was really not much of a problem in having that kind of relationship with Wharton. When the agreement, when the understanding was reached that we could have this relationship, I put together an MOU, which we subsequently signed with Wharton towards the end of 1997.

Pat Meyer: NUS and NTU, the business schools were supposed to close in the original concept and students would be moving to this new third university, why did that change and how did that impact the development of the third university?

John Yip: I really do not know the real reason why that changed. But certainly in the concept paper, and in discussions with Dr. Tan, as a result of which the concept paper reflected that NTU would close its business school, NUS will reduced the number to 300 per year or something like that, around that figure, the idea was to give, to allow SMU a good head start. As I see it, that would be a logical assumption I would make. Give SMU a good start, so that if anybody wanted to do a business degree then they would logically choose SMU or NUS. But of course as you know, when SMU opened its door for its first batch of students, the very bright applied to SMU. And that was a really a feather in the cap for SMU.

Pat Meyer: Just to clarify, at that point SIM was...going to be the third university?

John Yip: SIM was going to be the third university but with the provision, with the understanding that SIM would continue as SIM but there will be an SMU to be set up but there would be no cross subsidies of funds. There would be funding from Government for SMU although it was to be a private university, funding was to come from Government. And I wouldn't like to call it a private university in that sense. Perhaps it's similar to what we have here, the independent school system in Singapore where funding is given by the Government but of course you run it independently, but not as private in the sense that you can't do a lot of things that private universities can do.

Pat Meyer: In your first year at SIM, you had the responsibility for looking at the development of the school as a university and also the responsibility for SIM, this place for adult learners. How did you divide your time? How did you spend your time in that first year?

John Yip: I was employed by SIM. And as I said, Dr. Tan visited us in either February or March,

two months or so after I joined SIM and set in train [motion] this whole idea of a new university. So it was a lot of concentration on my part on what to do in terms of putting together a concept for a new university and how we move along, the directions in which the Governing council would want to chart for the university with inputs of Dr. Tan. At the same time of course, being CEO of SIM, I had to look after SIM matters as well. And SIM matters comprised membership activities, it comprised open university degree programs and it comprised collaboration with outside universities - that had to carry on. I couldn't say, I shouldn't say that I did it in my spare time. But certainly I was able to merge, to do both to the best of my ability. But of course the priority was to ensure that the third university would be discussed properly, the concept, and move along smoothly. And of particular concern to me, and having known SIM after six months there, was that I was very convinced that I should not let SIM die as a result of SMU. SIM should continue as SIM. It didn't take too much of persuasion [for] Dr. Tan or the council but I think they did see my point, in keeping SIM as SIM because SIM is the credible institution for providing education for the adults. And the whole idea therefore was not to evolve SIM into SMU and therefore destroying SIM but to have SIM put up a proposal for a new university and in ensuring that SIM remain as SIM.

Pat Meyer: Can you tell us, when you submitted the concept papers, what was the process that they went through? Who received them, who reviewed them and how did the feedback come to you?

John Yip: It was basically a SIM matter. And so it was the Governing Council of SIM elected at the AGM which had to decide how to go about putting together a concept for the new university. Being the CEO and being in the know of what would be the best and working with people in the Governing Council who may not necessary be educationists but who are in different industries, I put together a concept of what it should be, very clearly on how we should go about developing a new university and it was discussed by the Council very generally. They would of course give new ideas, as to what we should be, where we should go, and how we should go about it and how we're going to endorse certain issues that I raised with them, raised in my concept papers. And as a result, I was able to gather all their feedback and put up a revised paper. Not revised drastically, but revised to meet all their needs, at the same time to meet Dr. Tan to see what was his own view on the matter, so that it could get Government approval. I put up a concept paper in early September, first concept paper probably that was discussed at the SIM governing council. As a result, I put another paper up in November, met with Dr. Tan and then put up a final paper at the end of November for approval which was forthcoming.

Pat Meyer: And I want to look back, over this last 13 years or so, what do you think was the biggest challenge in the early days of planning for the third university?

John Yip: Besides getting government approval and government approval was crucial for a number of issues. One was affinity towards an American system. Nomenclature for academic staff, which you may think is not a big deal but it was a very big deal

because we are moving towards the American system it was only logical that the American nomenclature was adopted. Accepting the four year program wasn't an issue because as I said, after all the British system was a four year system with three years pass degree and an additional year honours. The city campus and getting Government to approve to give land was a big issue. Whether the Government will give land in this prime area was a big issue but we were quite confident that since Government was so bent on having a university that they would give the land and of course the funding that would come with it.

With Wharton's consultancy, with Wharton's involvement, we were quite confident that the university will get off to a very good head start. With or without NUS [and] NTU reducing their intake. After all we are going to start small as a boutique university and then develop it into a bigger university as we went along. With Wharton involvement I was definitely confident that we will get good students and I think that turned out to be the case.

Pat Meyer: What do you see as significant milestones or accomplishments of SMU?

John Yip: I could only say that the way SMU developed would surprise anyone. First of all, although Singapore government is known for its efficiency, effectiveness, government is also known for its cautiousness in ensuring standards. So the fact that it's so fast tracked - within a year, it was conceptualized, within that same year it was approved by Government although it took some months more to get it through Parliament. Within that short time, you had your campus; you had the funds rolling in. Then you had the development, fast track development with Wharton, finding your first president, then your campus, your temporary campus at Evans Road and your new campus here. A lot of money has gone into it, a lot of thinking has gone into it, a lot of brain power has gone into it but then with your students, your first cohort coming in, being very good students, your pioneers really put SMU on the map.

And of course the faculty, [we] mustn't forget the faculty, the fact that you have good faculty and links to Wharton. That really helped. I would say that the fast track move, you know, building up. And now you are going into other areas, law and what have you, in that short time. Earlier on, the intention was that in the initial years, NTU would award degrees. Because after all NTI didn't award degrees but NTI courses were accredited by NUS for almost ten years. I may be wrong but I think that it was that length of time. And that's a local university. And so long NUS was accrediting NTI before NTI became NTU. And the fact that from the very first pioneering batch, we awarded degrees, that is really a big achievement in a society which is cautious but at the same time, efficient and of course will do its homework in terms of quality assurance and so on.

Pat Meyer: Has SMU grown in the way that you expected it?

John Yip: I think SMU will grow even more. And it's good because you have amassed good

practices that other universities can look at and say, "Hey, why can't I do that?" You know, likewise, I'm sure you also look outwards to see what are the good practices elsewhere even within local universities and adopt them. I think that's the pragmatic approach that Singapore has always adopted. And I'm sure institutions in Singapore will adopt. To me, there is nothing new in education. Everything has been done before but in a different way. It's a question of how best to do it the way you want. The principles are there. So the best practice approach would be is the way to go.

Pat Meyer: What are your observations on how SMU has contributed to changes in tertiary education?

John Yip: It's giving the two universities a run for their money. Students want to get into universities of their choice, so they will apply to three universities and the universities select the students. But still, the universities are advertising. And I think that is a good sign. They want their university known, that they are offering this and that. They are this rank in the world ranking whatever, for different courses. And it means that they want to improve and they want to be there. So I would say in a way that the presence of SMU being the third is giving the two universities a run for their money.

Pat Meyer: Looking ahead, a few decades, what do you see as the challenge for Singapore's education, in particular, tertiary education?

John Yip: I think Singapore can really afford to have more universities. At one time, the fear was that there would be unemployed graduates. As they saw decades ago elsewhere, I feel that fear is unfounded. And the more universities you have, there's more education. After all they always say the only resource Singapore has is its people. Therefore we must provide opportunities for the people to develop. Workers are being developed, you know, not just now, but whenever there is a change in economic structure. There should be people who come here for an undergraduate degree in psychology and move to do a post graduate degree in business. They should provide these opportunities for people to change track or widen their knowledge. I like to see people doing more literature for example. You build up that interest in you. So with more universities, I hope they don't stop at four, maybe five. And with UniSIM for working adults and other link ups with universities overseas. They are providing to develop our people's potential, after all that's the only resource we have. So we have got the fundamentals right in terms of education. We try to stretch everybody to their best potential. And universities and schools are there to nurture people. To nurture them to their highest potential. That is a *cliché* no doubt but it is the whole idea of developing them intellectually, their value system, skills. I fear for value systems.

Pat Meyer: For you personally, in the early planning days of SMU or SIM, what was your most memorable moment?

John Yip: To see efforts coming to fruition. My most memorable moment for SMU, was coming here, at the opening for this building, seeing KP Ho and telling him, "Look at the success." I felt really great about it for the little part I played in this venture. SIM, I still keep in touch with the people there. There is a big difference between working in SIM and working in Ministry, Government. It's very hierarchical in Government. All of it is seniority-based to some extent. [At] SIM, I worked with very young people. And it was a refreshing change. And I feel young myself.

End of Interview.

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
AGM	Annual General Meeting
A-level	Advanced Level
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPE	Council of Professional Education
CPTE	Council for Professional and Technical Education
EDB	Economic Development Board
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GSE	Graduate School of Education
HR	Human Resources
IAAP	International Academic Advisory Panel
ITE	Institute for Technical Education
JC	Junior College
LSE	London School of Economics
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOU	Memorandum Of Understanding
NTI	Nanyang Technological Institute
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
O-level	Ordinary Level