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Oral History Interview with Tony Tan Keng Yam: Conceptualising SMU

Tony Keng Yam TAN

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Tony Tan

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 20 May 2011

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

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Patricia Meyer:

This is Pat Meyer. Today is Friday, 20th of May 2011. I'll be speaking with Dr Tony Tan, former deputy prime minister of Singapore. This interview is taking place at the Li Ka Shing Library recording studio at Singapore Management University [SMU] and is part of the 'Conceptualising SMU' oral history project. Dr Tan has been involved in education his whole career, from his early days teaching at the University of Singapore to playing a leading role in shaping Singapore's university sector. Today we'd like to ask you about your recollections and your perspectives on the formation of Singapore Management University.

Tony Tan:

Let me start with early 1980s when National University was established, I believe, in 1980 through the merger of the University of Singapore and the Nanyang University. And that served as our only university in Singapore for about, at that time, for about ten years. We only had one university. Singapore was different from other newly developing countries in the sense that we never proliferated the number of universities. We always felt it was very important to maintain very high standards, both in the teaching as well as in the student body and in the faculty.

By the late 1980s, it was clearly recognised that the demand for university places far exceeded what was available in NUS and therefore we started to establish another university, institution, first called the Nanyang Technological Institute in the late 1980s which eventually evolved to become the Nanyang Technological University [NTU] in 1991 I believe. And between NUS and NTU these provided enough places.

But again, every ten years demand grows, so by the late 1990s it was quite clear that we needed another institution at university level. And I was involved in studying what type of institution would be suitable. My view at that time was that rather than simply establishing another university, we should take the opportunity actually to further develop our university sector—provide differentiation, provide variety, provide new directions. NTU was different from NUS so I felt that the third university should be different from NUS and NTU. And there followed many years of discussion with the public, among the ministry officials [and] members of Parliament about what type of university would be suitable. It has to be something that's relevant to Singapore, something that meets the needs of Singaporeans. Eventually we narrowed it down to a university that was, that would be focused on management, on economics, on business which we thought would be complementary to NUS and NTU.

However, I thought that we should not just repeat what has gone before, and try and take a new direction. And because both NUS and NTU had developed essentially from a British model, I felt that it would be good to look to the US [United States] for another type of university with a different model which could provide a new dimension to university education in Singapore.

So when I visited the US, I visited a number of universities and to discuss with them to find out whether any of them were interested in partnering the Singapore Government in establishing a university in Singapore. The University of Pennsylvania and its Wharton School were extremely enthusiastic about the possibility. At that time, the Wharton School, recognising the growth of Asia, was trying to find a means of increasing their footprint here, and they felt that they needed to have a base here, but as usual they're not quite sure how to proceed. And partnering the Singapore Government to form a

management university in Singapore seemed to be the ideal. From the Singapore Government point of view, we would be in partnership with a very prestigious and well-known school of management in the US, the Wharton School.

Then the question came to establishing the actual structure of the new university in Singapore. Here, I felt that if it's going to be a business school, we should look beyond the traditional sort of establishment people in order to form the council. And I wanted to find somebody from the business world, preferably someone young. We had originally thought that we could build this university on the foundation of the Singapore Institute of Management because they had a school, but I think it was realised quite early that this was not possible because it was quite difficult to graft something onto it, an existing establishment and it'd be much better to start of completely new. I talked to Mr Ho Kwon Ping and asked him and told him, this is what we are going to do, and I think [that] you could start the university on a new direction. Of course, Mr Ho's response, quite understandably was he knows nothing about education. This would be something new for him, but I told him that this is what I thought would be very useful. It was also crucial at the time that Janice Bellace who was then the deputy head of the Wharton School and who was a very strong champion of this joint venture agreed that she would take on the role as the first president of SMU. I thought that was very significant, because with her appointment this would ensure very close nexus between SMU and Wharton. And she did an excellent job in conceptualising the whole university, essentially starting from scratch, I mean, when she first started.

There of course, we decided that we would not establish SMU on the same legal grounds as NUS and NTU because NUS and NTU were statutory boards, and in fact, they had to be established by Acts of Parliament. For SMU we thought it would be better to start something new and therefore we established SMU as a company, not as a statutory board. And as a company there would be more flexibility but of course since SMU would be dependent on the Singapore Government for funding there has to be some relationship to the Ministry of Education, so this has to be discussed with the MOE [Ministry of Education] officials. Eventually we agreed that what MOE would be involved in would be to approve the budget, very broad guidelines. And as far as the staffing was concerned, the only two appointments which the minister of education would need to give approval to, or would have his agreement for, would be the chairman of the council¹ and the president of the university. All other decisions would be left to the SMU council and the SMU management to work out. And I think that is a very good direction because subsequently both NUS and NTU were established along this model and I think the results have been very beneficial.

Fortunately the Bukit Timah campus of the former University of Singapore was available. It was not occupied and SMU took over that campus. We renovated some of the buildings and it served SMU well for a number of years while its permanent campus was established. For the site of the permanent campus, again, I felt that as far as possible it should be different from NUS and NTU which are located in basically the outskirts of Singapore, in the suburbs—NUS in Kent Ridge and NTU up in Jurong—and if it's going to be a business university, then ideally that it should be located within the city. That took a lot of discussion within Cabinet because any place within the city will result in the use of extremely valuable land, from a commercial point of view, for educational purposes. But

¹ In SMU's context, council refers to the board of trustees.

eventually I'm happy that the Cabinet agreed to the proposal to establish a city university within here in Bras Basah Road, different from NUS and NTU with a different constitution, with a different structure, and in partnership with the Wharton school.

Tony Tan: I'm happy to see that it's now firmly established, can more than hold its own with NUS and NTU. And I think that from my conversations with the students, with the faculty, with Wharton, and time to time with the parents on my visits to SMU, I think that it's been a great success. It has contributed substantially to Singapore and I think it's also benefitted NUS and NTU because they have looked at what SMU was doing and they felt that they could change some of their practices and I think much for the better.

Tony Tan: First the IAAP [International Academic Advisory Panel], this was established I believe, I'm talking from memory now, I believe in 1997. Is that right? When I was a... I wasn't Minister for Education at that time was I?

Patricia Meyer: No, you were Deputy Prime Minister.

Tony Tan: One of the peculiar characteristics of my career is that whichever ministry I was in, whichever capacity I was serving in, either in the public or private sector, the Singapore Government had always asked me to look after university education. I mean, my day job may change from time to time but my interest [was] in university education, and I think that I was happy to have the opportunity to work with successive ministers of education to help to develop the university sector grow.

Patricia Meyer: Did you have any input or discussions about the name for this new university, the choice of name for SMU?

Tony Tan: Oh yes, we had a long discussion particularly with the officials in the ministry, with Mr Ho Kwon Ping, a lot of possible names were discussed. What would you call it? Singapore University of Management and so on. Of course it's very important that when you find a name that you also realise it has to be a good acronym because people will have to refer to it and eventually, like many of these things, we actually ended up with the first suggestion which was Singapore Management University after going around, several months..

Patricia Meyer: One of the things that SMU did differently was to go ahead and to issue its own degrees from the beginning. What were your thoughts on that?

Tony Tan: Starting off SMU on its own was a big risk and we discussed it for a long time as to whether this was advisable because I think it's very important for Singapore—whichever university we start—that the university should not fail. So it was very important that the university should succeed, the degrees of the university should be recognised and

accepted by employers. The university should be able to attract its fair share of bright students and be held in high regard by parents. Starting a university from scratch in the context of Singapore, a small and urban environment where parents and students would inevitably compare the newcomer as I said with a proven product, NUS and NTU, was a big risk.

Eventually I agreed when Mr Ho and his council said they thought that this was best. And essentially for three reasons. The first reason was, I think, a very substantive point—that if they wanted to set SMU in a different direction from NUS or NTU, it should start from the very beginning. It should be different. It shouldn't be built on what had gone before. The second reason why I thought that this might succeed was the fact that, it was, that the subjects which SMU were going to teach, business and management, I think would be very widely accepted in Singapore because of Singapore's position as a business hub. So there would be a demand for such places. And then the final reason why I thought this could succeed was because, you know, with the approval of the Cabinet, to allow SMU to establish itself as a city university on extremely valuable land. This would differentiate SMU from NUS and NTU. So because of these three reasons—first of all we should start completely different from NUS and NTU, secondly because the subjects were business and management which would be widely accepted in Singapore, and thirdly, that it should have a city campus which would differentiate it directly from NUS and NTU. These would give the new university a chance to succeed.

But, you know, as you say the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The question is, "Will you attract students? Will they find jobs when they graduate?" That's unknown. So SMU took in its first students in 2000. They graduated in 2003, 2004. And I think we're very relieved that they were, that they were accepted well and since then I think seven cohorts of students have graduated from SMU and all of them have been very well received. So it's been a success.

Patricia Meyer: Another thing that was done differently was setting different types of admission criteria for this university. Can you talk about how Singapore looked at admissions criteria for universities?

Tony Tan: Again we wanted SMU to have a different approach to admitting students from NUS and NTU. And the SMU council chaired by Mr Ho Kwon Ping met with the faculty, with Janice Bellace who was the [SMU] president and they thought that they would have a different approach rather than just relying on academic grades which was how NUS and NTU admitted students at the time. And it was a brave decision because people are not used to it. And I think that the faculty and particularly Janice Bellace did a great job in going out to the junior colleges, talking to the teachers and explaining what they were looking for, talking to students to attract them to apply for SMU. And since then I think the approach may have been modified a little bit with time. Both NUS and NTU, I think, have also modified their admissions process. So I think that this is now reason, another way that SMU has been able to contribute to Singapore.

Patricia Meyer: I wanted to ask, have you had any opportunities to meet SMU students over the years?

Meyer: Any impressions you can share with us?

Tony Tan: And I think that one of the characteristics which many people have remarked to me about SMU—including employers—is the fact that they see SMU students as different from NUS and NTU students in the sense that SMU students are more outgoing, they're prepared to take more initiative, they can present themselves well. And I think that this is because of the way the courses are taught in SMU, not in the lecture format, but more in the interactive discussion mode and it shows that when the students go in after A-levels, they are all the same; of course, they all come from the schools in Singapore. But four years of different type of education, I think has shown that you can encourage students to have confidence in themselves, to be able to sell themselves, to present themselves well, and to be confident in interacting with their peers, with faculty, and later on with the public and with business people. And I think this is one of the strong selling points and enough years have now passed to make this a recognisable characteristic of SMU and its one of SMU's strong selling points.

Patricia Meyer: Are there any memories from the very first graduation ceremony in 2004 that you can share with us? I think you were the speaker that day.

Tony Tan: Yes, I was happy to. Mr Ho Kwon Ping invited me because and this was the first cohort. So I was happy to accept it. Because in a sense, it's a completion of the first part of a long journey. The work of establishing universities never ends. A university is always an ongoing project, but this was a significant milestone I was happy to see—that SMU had managed to cross that very significant point. Since then, of course, I've watched SMU grow, I've had opportunities to interact with senior establishment here, with the faculty and I've seen them establishing new schools including the School of Law.

What started off as basically fifteen years ago as an idea has turned out to be, I think, a reality and, I think, something which has been extremely... made a great contribution to Singapore and will continue to make contribution to Singapore, Singapore parents, and to Singapore young men and women. I think that's a great source of satisfaction.

Patricia Meyer: That leads very much into the question that I have next. How does the university today compare with what you thought might be possible, say fifteen years ago?

Tony Tan: In a sense, where does SMU fit in within the university landscape in Singapore today? At the last IAAP meeting in September last year, I think one very important observation was made by the IAAP members that the Singapore education system which had been essentially developing steadily for the last— from 1980 to 2010—thirty years, had reached a level when essentially it is matured.

So the IAAP said that in a sense that with all of these, essentially, you have a complete university landscape already—there is sufficient variety for students and their parents, there is sufficient variety of courses, there is competition and, essentially, as I remarked at

the press conference, what the IAAP was telling us, essentially, is that you have run out of people to learn from. We used to learn from a lot from the US, from other countries. Our university sector has now reached a level where essentially the IAAP's conclusion was that the easy part is over.

When we started SMU we looked at what Wharton was doing, we just transplanted it here. When we started SUTD we looked at what MIT was doing. Now you are at the stage when, who do you learn from? My conclusion from the IAAP's remarks was we have now earned the privilege of making our own mistakes now.

Patricia Meyer: The experience of starting this third university, are there any lessons learnt for Singapore?

Tony Tan: I would say that I think that what we gained from starting SMU was to recognise the importance of having an open mind, being prepared to take a fresh approach, even an unconventional direction, provided that you discuss it well, provided that you do your groundwork. And, ultimately, and I think this is where the university sector and SMU has benefitted very much, and I think with the very strong support of the Cabinet and the Singapore Government—none of these would have been possible without the support of the Cabinet and the Government. And I think they were prepared to take a risk and I think that the results have shown that the risk has been worthwhile. But there was no assurance from the beginning that this was going to be successful. SMU could have gone another way.

Patricia Meyer: Just looking to the future, you talked about this a little bit, what challenges do you see facing university education in Singapore in the future?

Tony Tan: Well, I think that's a perennial question which every country, every generation will have to ask itself. Singapore is changing, our society is changing, our economy is changing. The aspirations of students and their parents are changing. So our university sector, the Government, the Ministry of Education will have to take cognizance of these developments and ensure that our universities change in accordance to the needs of society and our economy. And to be alert and be prepared to take timely measures, which is what we have done the last thirty years. The last development was the establishment of this liberal arts college [Yale-NUS College], which the IAAP had recommended some four years ago. So, so long as we are prepared to take that approach and we have the courage of our convictions, I think the university sector in Singapore will continue to develop, will do well. There will be many challenges but I see a very bright future for universities here as well as for Singapore.

Patricia Meyer: I'd like to ask you, about this experience for SMU, what has it meant for you personally?

Tony Tan: It's been a great satisfaction to see SMU grow as I said from basically, what was a piece of paper into now a thriving institution—well recognised in the world; well accepted by

Singapore parents, Singapore students; welcomed by employers; SMU graduates, I think, being very well regarded, making a contribution to our economy and I think to our society.

Patricia
Meyer:

Thank you.

End of Interview

Acronyms List

	Acronym	Definition
1.	EDB	Economic Development Board
2.	IAAP	International Academic Advisory Panel
3.	MBA	Master of Business Administration
4.	MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
5.	MOE	Ministry of Education
6.	NTI	Nanyang Technological Institute
7.	NTU	Nanyang Technological University
8.	NUS	National University of Singapore
9.	OCBC	Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation
10.	SMU	Singapore Management University
11.	SUTD	Singapore University of Technology and Design
12.	US	United States