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# Oral History Interview with Ho Kwon Ping: Conceptualising SMU

Kwon Ping HO

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**Singapore Management University**

**Li Ka Shing Library**

**Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story**

Interviewee: Ho Kwon Ping

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 17 February 2011

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

Accession No.: SMUOH-2011-0018PV

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*Users of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. SMU does not exercise editorial control on the contents of the interview. We advise users to refer to the audio recording for the accurate/ authorised version of the interview.*

Patricia Meyer: I'm Pat Meyer. Today is Thursday, 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2011. Today I'll be speaking with Ho Kwon Ping, the first and current chairman of SMU's [Singapore Management University] Board of Trustees. This interview is part of the 'Conceptualising SMU' oral history project. We're meeting in the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library at Singapore Management University and the subject of our recording is your recollections and your perspective on the formation of SMU, and your role as chairman of the board of trustees.

I'd like to start by first asking you about this project itself. Last year at Patron's Day, you suggested collecting papers and photos for our university archives and these interviews are part of that effort to capture the early days of SMU. Can you just tell us about your motivation for this project?

Ho Kwon Ping: I suppose it's driven by two different things. One is, I've come to realise that, especially when I see that SMU has become what it has become—and in the beginning it was nothing more than a piece of paper, a simple concept—it's one of the few projects I've been involved in that has come such a long way from zero, and it's finally dawned on me as would probably to many of our early pioneers that the actual history of the beginning of SMU could be of interest to people way, way down the road. And an institution like a university—unlike a company or even a government department—is a living community with changing constituencies all the time. And as we find with other universities, people are very interested in the beginnings of the university one hundred, two hundred years afterwards and, *inshallah*, Singapore and SMU will be around two hundred years from now. So that's on one side, I think it's important for pioneers not to, not to see themselves as important, but to see that the events they were involved in will be of interest and significance to others, and it behoves us as part of the responsibility that we had to even start the institution, to ensure that this history remains.

I'm hoping that what we do now, when many of the people who were involved are getting older, we should lay the same groundwork, so that people in the future can make use of our memories and have and continue keeping alive the origin and tradition of SMU.

Patricia Meyer: Now I'd like you to step back in time to the mid-1990s. Could you just tell us about your career at that time and your views on Singapore's education system?

Ho Kwon Ping: The first time I ever knew anything about this was at lunch with Cham Tao Soon. He'll probably have different (laughter) recollections of the lunch, if he recollects it at all. I think I probably, I was certainly intrigued by the idea. As you'll know later on, when we talk about the events, the Government didn't even really have an idea as to what kind of university they wanted. We went through so many permutations—from a comprehensive university with 25,000 people, to a business school and a business school alone which would be the monopoly business school for all of Singapore and all the other universities will shut down their business schools. We've gone through many, many permutations so it's clear that they had not an, a clear idea what they wanted at all. It was Tony Tan, who I think was then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, who I think has got really radical views about education and to me is really the person who's shaken up the entire tertiary landscape in Singapore. And it's, and to whom I think Singapore really

owes its greatest debt regarding what our educational system overall has become at the tertiary level.

It was the most illogical choice. Okay because, I barely managed to get a bachelor's degree, and I've gone to three universities and I end up with only a bachelor's. You would normally assume you'd get somebody who's a little bit more acquainted with university education, but I do think probably the reason that they asked me, you know, the big bet on Tony Tan's perspective was because I had very clear and very strong views about university education, untainted by expertise. We all know that sometimes expertise gets in the way of trying to do something new. So I met Tony Tan, and I think there was general discussion about a third university. What I do remember well was that the very starting point was that this should be a private university, but he had really not much of an idea as to how to go about it. That I know, because after some degree of discussion, the device he wanted, in order to start SMU—there was no name even of the university—was for me to go in and take over SIM, Singapore Institute of Management. And then use SIM and make it into a third university.

Then for quite a while SIM was to be the vehicle for the third university. We recommended otherwise, government accepted, then we set up SMU, and then I became chairman of both. Then after a while, I decided that look, I'll stick with SMU and I gave up SIM. The real significance of SMU at the broader level is that we were actually the, the change catalyst for completely changing the university situation everywhere else in Singapore.

Patricia Meyer: Can you tell me, in the period leading up to the opening day of the university, what were some of the biggest challenges you faced and how you resolved them?

Ho Kwon Ping: I think from my particular perspective, because it would be many, many different levels of challenges from faculty recruitment to student recruitment to the campus and so on, I think from my perspective overseeing it all the biggest challenge was one of credibility. Credibility to students, to parents, to the broader community, to MOE [Ministry of Education]. So, we had many people who were looking at this university as a rather strange little experiment, and we could have flopped. And I think that was always topmost in my mind. A flopping would be one measured by simply the fact that we could be seen as a mediocre new university, one that had no impact at all, no big deal. And it, I guess, it wouldn't have made much difference to life in Singapore, but it would have made a huge difference to all of us, because we had these great dreams about what we wanted to do. So to me that was the biggest challenge. Like launching SMU, to us was like launching a new product. I likened it to iPad, because there's a certain similarity, that Steve Jobs can do all the market surveys he wants to do, but the iPad wasn't built on the basis of, or even iPod, on the basis of market surveys. It's based on what he thought the public would want, but it could have flopped. You really would not have known beforehand whether it would flop or not.

So we had great dreams about what we wanted to do, and we had hoped it would resonate with people, but, you never know, it could've flopped. So, when you look back, that fear of flopping, in my view was the biggest challenge. It's not fear of money, fear of

not having money because the money was going to be there, Government was supporting us but it was the fact that we could have flopped. And a lot of things had to come together for it to have succeeded and, thankfully, I think it all came together—the faculty, the students, the administration, the choice of campus, the pedagogical system, everything came together, and maybe because it was the first of its kind.

Patricia Meyer: Speaking of NUS and NTU, at one time, students within their business schools were going to be joining this new third university and then that changed. How did that affect the development of SMU?

Ho Kwon Ping: There were debates within MOE, we would hear about the idea that we should just be then the sole provider of business education. We actually didn't want that, because it's against my personal values and the whole values that SMU were set up on, that, that, I wouldn't call it competition as such, I would say, diversity is always good. That's a fundamental value even within the ethos of SMU itself. We don't want all top academic performers. We don't want all Singaporeans. Diversity has an inherent value, in and of itself. And diversity in the choice you give to Singaporeans, are, first of all it does lead to competition, which is very healthy.

We, I think having NUS and NTU business schools that are doing very well, can only be good for us because a) it makes Singapore as a destination for, for high quality business education, that will rub off on SMU. It means competition so that we bring better professors overall. Competition overall, I mean if you're, if you are a business person, competition is always good. And, more importantly as that [a] Singaporean I think it provides diversity. NUS is going to have a slightly differently calibrated business curriculum, so will NTU, and so will us. And that's good for everybody. So it affected us only to the extent that, to the extent that these things were ever discussed, a mono, a monopoly on business education or a large university. If they had gone ahead, against our recommendations, it would have been, in my view quite negative. But thankfully, they were more distractions than anything else.

Patricia Meyer: Can you tell us about some of the challenges or issues faced in developing the faculty for the new university and recruiting faculty for this new university?

Ho Kwon Ping: Perhaps even more importantly than that was the fact that Singapore was seen as an academic backwater. I think we have changed that to a certain degree in very concrete ways. The other two universities before they became autonomous were not really free to set their own salary levels. We actually said we have, being a business school, we have to have international salaries. Business schools have the highest-paid faculty in the world. Finance, the highest. Well, they're like almost like investment bankers because they criss-cross. So we had to bite the bullet and with MOE's indulgence we actually offered salaries that were really competitive with US institutions. That's a problem, that for example, Cambridge isn't able to do, as a state university. So that's why it's a big bane, a brain drain now from Cambridge and Oxford to the best US universities. Research we were willing to pay for. So the whole climate in Singapore has changed. National Research Foundation is, is giving incredible grants to top scientists to come

here. And people go to a university largely because of a) they have decent salary for themselves and b) they offer decent grants and c) the soft part, you have a community of like-minded people. So that's all happening, but the time when we started it wasn't really happening yet. So we had to, sort of, tailor our strategies accordingly.

There was another big problem, and even now I have to tackle, that is the big debate between foreign and local [faculty]. It's a big problem. The problem is because of the skewed nature of international academia. There is a high degree of mobility for people who have made it in US universities to go anywhere else around the world. There's very little reverse mobility for Singaporeans who've chosen to have an academic career, come back to Singapore and teach, unless they're willing to travel a lot.

Patricia Meyer: What kind of composition were you speaking about for that first board [SMU's Board of Trustees]?

Ho Kwon Ping: I wanted a mixed board, but, but I just wanted to emphasise how that is also in a way, very novel because this was a board that would be selected by me, and from here on, it's self-selecting—meaning, it's not me anymore, it's the whole board deciding. That's a critical aspect of autonomy. If the board cannot be self-selecting, then you don't have autonomy. So I want to emphasise how when you talk about autonomy, the board is important. I mean the first board it was put together by me by trying to put together a number of people with diverse backgrounds, including overseas trustees too. We wanted trustees like, Narayana Murthy, for example, was important because he's known for his CSR (corporate social responsibility) and yet he's widely respected in India, and we also wanted Indian students. So when we chose trustees, it's a mix of things we put in. I mean, let's say there are twenty trustees, I needed to have enough trustees I could fill up the local, the committees, who would have to be resident here, so that's one. I wanted foreign trustees to represent countries whose inputs are important to us, and who are individuals also that we wanted, we think are important. So we've got, now we've got Jaime Ayala [Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala] who's, who's, you know, not only prominent businessman but also has an interest in education, et cetera.

I think what I wanted to do linking all the trustees is that, I wanted people who have, well they all serve pro bono, all right, that's one important point. All the other, all the other boards that one sits on, even Temasek Boards and so on, you're paid. For university you're not paid. So you've got to be people who have a certain passion for what they're doing and have to believe, at the same time, that they themselves are making a big contribution. So we've had board members come and go and so on, but my philosophy of it has been a) diversity is important, and b) empowerment.

Patricia Meyer: Can you just tell us about the decisions or the work of the board? What happens at the board level, and how does it support the university and is there any interaction with the Ministry of Education beyond, you know, what you described as suggesting names for the board?

Ho Kwon Ping: We also have established clearly that we have to have governance systems that are very robust. So the board always has an executive session, where all management leaves, including the president and everybody else, and there are very rigorous discussions about, about everything. Including management, including the president, assessment of the president and so on. Because we have, we're aware of one responsibility we have, not just to SMU but to, hopefully, a kind of system we want to set up in Singapore.

Patricia Meyer: Can you tell us about the opportunities that you've had to meet SMU students or interact with SMU students and the alumni, and also the convocation and commencement ceremonies within SMU?

Ho Kwon Ping: Convocation is like nothing people have seen, right I mean, and it's all done by the students. You know that's part of our ethos also, every convocation is organised by the students themselves. And besides the normal kind of stuff they have also, the ,the events, the, the, the, sort of student performances that they put together, it's quite incredible, everybody is impressed by it. They even do a few, in my view, rather kitsch stuff, themselves. I mean, it's all done by them! You know, all, many of them were probably guys who came from national service. So, you know the trooping of the colours almost, the taking of the student pledge which is, sort of, take off from the national pledge and so on. But these were all done by students, never done by management. It was, if you talk to dean of students, I don't know was it Aik Meng [Low Aik Meng] at that time, or who, but essentially, it was; this is where it's also totally new for us compared to the other universities. And it ties in with the whole issue of the sense of ownership. Now we can't get students designing their own courses, but the point is, where you can give people a sense of ownership empowerment, give it to them. A convocation exercise need not be decided by, by management. Lord, leave it to the students! So it's left to them, they started all these traditions.

The idea of a student gift, that people collect money and give to the university, that's all started [by the students]. So, the, I'm saying this to you because I think there's a philosophy behind it. My meeting with student alumni and asking the student alumni to start new things because eventually there will be a big alumni club and you must start it. So, all along the way I think we're having students starting new traditions, keenly aware of them because they will, they will take root. And it's good because even after only ten years now I meet new students today, and they'll say, "Oh, those oldies, they did it that way so we're..." had You know, there's already a sense, ten years is a long span for a young person. So that's as far as students are concerned.

I keep in touch with alumni, because I think they are—in fact about six or seven of the old alumni see me every year. And they get me to, give my views about their careers. I'm kind of like a, like an uncle. "Is it good for you to change this job? Is it not good for you to change this job?" (laughter) People, young people need guidance, so I keep up with them. I listen to pitches by SMU students who want to start a new business. So it's my way of, for me, it's useful, for them I guess it's useful that they have mentors around. For me it's useful because it's one of the ways I try to keep tabs of how young people are thinking, how SMU students are thinking, of course I always ask them about complaints and this and that and so on.

Patricia Meyer: I'd like to now look back over the fourteen or so years since you first heard about the idea for this third university and to where we are today. How does where we are today compare with what you thought might be possible so many years ago?

Ho Kwon Ping: I would have to say of all the other things I've, of everything I've been associated with other than my own company, SMU's probably been the most deeply satisfying because of two things. One is the nature of the work is a non profit, so therefore it's hugely satisfying. Even if you give me a chance to start a new company, it's not that much fun. I have to start my, I've to run my own company every day; I've to work on profits and loss and so on. Here you really feel—and I know all my other trustees feel the same thing—that, that you are actually helping to change something in Singapore. Especially if it's young people, it's all the more gratifying. And of course, having a chance to do something where you're doing it from scratch, really is, well, pretty scary. When you're younger, you don't, when you're so small, I mean, I guess if you were to tell me today that this is SMU, this is what you're going to eventually have, now you're starting ten years ago, can you be sure you can get there? I think the task would seem so daunting and the responsibilities are so huge, that I might actually not want to accept it, especially since its all free time and everything else. The beauty of it is when you start with something small, you have no idea what it's going to be and the beauty of it is you dare to take more risks. And the beauty of it was, we were never told by Tony Tan or by anybody else, "This is the blueprint and this is what you're going to become." It was like, really, as we grew, we evolved and the sense of ownership was huge. So to me, yes, I think, it's been deeply satisfying,

Patricia Meyer: To follow up on that, the next person that comes into your role, what kind of qualities would they need to have?

Ho Kwon Ping: I think you've got to have somebody who's enough of a non-crusty, old, traditional person to understand that a university also has a key task of being an exciting place for young people. And, thankfully, I think, although my 'years' may be advanced I think, I think perhaps more 'young' in meaningful ways, I don't know how to do Facebook and all that but I think in more critical ways I might be more young thinking. Critical in, I know, in which I challenge, young people challenge things, they challenge norms. I think generally I challenge norms, more than most people of my generation and my level of establishment. So, to me then I guess if I were looking for a replacement to myself, I would look for somebody who, whose outlook on education, outlook on young people, outlook on life, and outlook on what he wants to create within the corporate culture here is novel, who is excited by and passionate about creating that kind of environment. I think that's more important than a, individual attribute is more important than the technical attributes of whether that person has ever run a university before, et cetera and so on.

Patricia Meyer: How can SMU distinguish, or continue to distinguish itself from Singapore's other universities in the future?



Ho Kwon  
Ping: It is smaller. By virtue of smallest of size, there will always be, there will always be this distinguishing feature. With smaller size, smaller classroom size, smaller everything, there'll be a greater sense of intimacy. So, that will continue. But in terms of the, the actual programmes we'd offer and so on and I'm talking about many years down the road, I think it's always going to be simply a matter of finding niches for yourself. Now, SMU has found certain niches already. Clear niches, the fact that we've always said the exciting areas of education are, is really at the intersection of traditional disciplines. Bearing in mind that traditional disciplines were set up in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—biology, physics, chemistry, that's those are all 19<sup>th</sup> century constructs. Today the most exciting areas would be you know between art and computer science, its animation. Between physics and biology, biophysics and so on. Now Of course we're not involved in all those areas but to the extent that we are going to be offering joint degree in law and in business, in business and accountancy, in economics and law for example, we will be of interest to other, to other students and we'll distinguish ourselves that way. Now, when NUS goes that direction, we'll be less so.

We have said, we've actually said that if we had to ever use simple way, a handle for calling for, stating in twenty-five words or less what our ambition is, and you always have to use other examples, other names of institutions to sort of give people an impression, what we've actually said in our strategy sessions in the past is that, we want to be an LSE [London School of Economics] but with a Princeton type of setup. Princeton type of setup because it's US-style education, liberal arts sort of thing. So, the style will be like Princeton, style and size but the offerings will not be like, like Princeton. LSE, because, it's a social science university. And of course management. So we don't see ourselves as being management only. I think that's quite limiting. Law is already, we're moving beyond that and so on, but we would probably want to offer a wider range of the social sciences. So it's basically a marriage, imagine LSE and Princeton marrying, and that should be your SMU.

Patricia  
Meyer: Just two questions in closing, this whole experience with SMU, can you tell us what it's meant for you, personally?

Ho Kwon  
Ping: Oh, a lot of work. (laughter) It has meant for me, personally, an avenue for me to have channelled many of my more activist inclinations of my past, which used to be channelled towards somewhat more destructive stuff like throwing stones at police and writing about articles that get me into jail and so on. I have always been wanting to make, to... to, I've always had views right or wrong, about a lot of things, besides my work. And I've always as a young person, been very unhappy about a lot of the things that were around me in my environment, unable to do, unable to make changes in any constructive manner. I have to admit that most of the things I did in my late teens to twenties that got me into trouble and so on were relatively destructive and didn't change the world.

Now at my age, dealing with young people, I have the opportunity to try to perhaps give them an environment that can challenge them, can inspire them to be what they want to be, and I think it's deeply satisfying. These are the things I would have wanted to able to

have grown up within in Singapore. And if, if I can challenge our young people to, to within the environment of SMU, become a future leader in whatever they choose to be, then I think that's really deeply satisfying. So, I hope that will continue. But if we can, if some of them can be leaders and I don't necessarily mean, you know, political leaders [but] leaders meaning you just, you, you, leaders meaning you think for yourself, and you do something new, and other people are tempted to follow you because what you're doing inspires them to want to do the same thing. To me that's already a leader. If we, if SMU can provide that kind of thought leadership, I would have been deeply satisfied.

Patricia  
Meyer:

Thank you very much.

**End of Interview**

## Acronyms List

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Definition</b>
AGM	Annual General Meeting
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CNN	Cable News Network
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
Fin Rem	Finance and Remuneration Committee
IAAP	International Academic Advisory Panel
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Science
MM	Minister Mentor
MOE	Ministry of Education
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
QAFU	Quality Assurance Framework for the Universities
SIM	Singapore Institute of Management
SIT	Singapore Institute of Technology
SMU	Singapore Management University
SUTD	Singapore University of Technology and Design
UniSim	Singapore Institute of Management University
UNSW	University of New South Wales
UPenn	University of Pennsylvania