


28-7-2015

Oral History Interview with Ruth Chiang: Growing SMU

Ruth CHIANG

Singapore Management University, ruthchiang@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/smu_oh

 Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Citation

CHIANG, Ruth. Oral History Interview with Ruth Chiang: Growing SMU. (2015). 9. Oral History Collection.

Available at: http://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/smu_oh/27

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the University Heritage at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email libIR@smu.edu.sg.

Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Growing SMU

Interviewee: Ruth Chiang

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 28 July 2015

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

Note to Reader:

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:	This is Patricia Meyer. Today is Tuesday, 28 th of July, 2015. I will be speaking with Ruth Chiang for the Conceptualizing SMU Oral History Project. We are meeting in the recording Studio of the Li Ka Shing library at Singapore Management University. The subject of our recording today is your role as a founding director of Student Life and Career Services. And I'd like to first start by asking you to step back and tell us about your career before you came to SMU.
Ruth Chiang :	Before I came to SMU, I was working with the Peoples' Association, and that's a community development organization. And I guess that is an association to garner people to come together, to work as a community, to bring back that kampong spirit and to serve the needs of the community. So I worked with the advisors to our grassroots organizations. And I've worked with the organization that has the Prime Minister as the Chairperson. And we meet rather regularly, every quarter for our board meetings. And there would be times when the Prime Minister would come and chair the meetings but most of the time it was chaired by the Deputy Chairman. He sets the direction and he is a Minister, usually the Minister. So I have served under at least 4 Ministers, and worked very closely with some of the politicians as well. So that was my life before I came to SMU.
Patricia Meyer:	You decided to join because you wanted to get closer to young people. What was your first job description? What were you asked to do?
Ruth Chiang :	I actually applied for the [board secretary position]. Okay, at that point in time, I thought, "Oh being a secretary to the board is not an issue" because I have always served with the PA Board (as the sub-secretary of the secretary). So I thought, "Oh, that's something I could do". But when I came, they said, "Why don't you consider being the Director of Student Life?" I said: "Oh, Student Life? That's really interesting". So then they told me, at that point of time we were not quite sure what it is. Then we take a look at, "oh what do the directors of other university's Student Life do?" So we have a vague idea, but then they asked me, "Well what would you do for the students?", then I thought, "Yeah, I want them to be able to be given the opportunity to develop themselves, to take on leadership, to expand their interest, and I would do whatever I can to help them along. I would have to develop this and grow with the job when I get into contact with the students.
Patricia Meyer:	You started at SMU in June, 2000, and just a couple months later, the first students were arriving. What did you do in those early months and who did you work with?
Ruth Chiang :	Actually, the day that I started was the day that I was put on the job immediately. It was 1 st June and we had an info session with the (potential) students there and then and it was in the Revenue House and I had to tell the (potential) students what Student Life was about and to get them all excited about joining SMU. I thought, "How could I do that? I haven't even started" But I did some (home) work before I joined the University so I was able to share with them what I hope to do as Director of Student Life. I really loved the first batch of students. They had such faith in us. We had no facilities, no budget and we didn't even have a Student Association or a Constitution. But we were able to excite the students to come in.
Patricia Meyer:	The early team that was involved in the foundation of SMU came up with some attributes that they hoped that the students would have, Circle values and the Student creed. Can you just tell us about how were those developed and how you hoped to incorporate them?

<p>Ruth Chiang :</p>	<p>So then we had the first batch of students coming in. Then we thought, “Okay, we have got to make sure, unlike other universities, to get these students to work as a team.” So we organized team building activities. We took them to the place that I (helped to) build, Outward Bound Singapore in Pulau Ubin, and there we had some teambuilding activities. While we were waiting for the boat to take us from the Singapore Island to Pulau Ubin; it’s a boat ride about 8 to 10 minutes; some of the students held us back because they were late. They were holding back everybody’s time. So I said, “Alright! I need you to reflect on what you did, and what you learnt from this and (SMU’s) circle values. Let’s put together something where you could put all the C.I.R.C.L.E values in it, and talk about the lessons learnt. So it was a lesson on reflection. And then with one of my colleagues in the legal profession, (AP) Saw Cheng Lim, we kind of refined what the students wrote and made it the student’s creed. So we then started a Students’ Creed and we got them (the students) to recite it every time we meet them so that they understood the Student’s Creed which embodied all the C.I.R.C.L.E values. We even had a song written to it. And at the first convocation, we had (AP) Kirpal (Singh) read the Students’ Creed together with a student called (Gerald) Goh Tua Yang to the music that Cheng Lim played. It’s a beautiful (piece of) music. That was exciting and that was how we started the Student’s Creed.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Can you tell us about how Community Service got started? And what was the students’ reaction to this idea of mandatory community service.</p>
<p>Ruth Chiang :</p>	<p>One of SMU’s missions (then) was to nurture leaders that have a heart and to have the ability to give back to society. And so how do we do this? So we wanted (them) to give back to society, to look beyond the school and to serve the community. So we came up with community service (CS). And we asked, “How long should we do it (CS)?” We didn’t want it to make it compulsory in the sense that “oh the students drag their feet. They stand at the street corner selling flags, raising money and they do it grudgingly”. So then, we engaged the community that needed help and asked “What could we do, with you, for you? And can we adopt projects that are meaningful both to you and to our students?” Then, of course, we had to convince the students: Yes, it was important for you and your personal development to be able to look beyond your own needs, to see the needs of others, to be able to empathize, and to give back to community and to do good, not perfunctorily, but to do so with a heart and to really know what it is to serve.</p> <p>So it’s all about service. We don’t want them to (treat it as) a kind of a tour, where they think, “Oh this is the poor old folk. We feed them a little”. (Then bid them) ‘Goodbye. God bless you’. And off they go”. I told my staff if we want to do a project, we take it on, we sustain it. (In) sustaining it, we hoped the students will continue to go back after they have completed the 80 hours. And many of our students do. You know our students do even a thousand over hours. They continue. And with this, we think it will set them apart even when they go to work, (they can) talk about your community service.</p> <p>So one of the highlights when they go for a job interview (is that the interviewer says), “Oh I see you have done community service. Tell me a little about that.” And that is when they can talks (share their experience).And that (showcases) the “soul” of that student, where they can share. And you see the glimmer in their eyes, their smile, and the satisfaction when they talk about it. And you know, ‘the passion comes out’. Don’t do something that you are forced to do, choose a community service that actually gels with you and resonates with you and can we support you. And if you don’t know what to do, where to go, we work with the VWOs (the Voluntary Welfare Organizations), the Grassroots, the NGOs (the non-governmental organization) and then we tell you their needs. You then decide if this is something</p>

	<p>that you want to do. Once you signed up, please commit to do it and do a good job. If you don't do a good job and there's a complaint, we will take this seriously and we will talk to you about it, not from the perspective of trying to discipline you, but to change you and develop you. (We would sit and find out): "What went wrong? How could you learn from this? And what remediation you could do to make it right?" (We intervene) because that's a value that they carry with them when they go to work. So that's how community service started. "It's everybody, hip, hip, hurray (moment), I have to do 80 hours of community service". We had to tell them the whys, we had to convince them, we had to encourage them and we had to excite them. And yes it sets SMU apart, this Community service is compulsory and it is about giving back.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Another program that you started very early was Finishing Touch. Can you tell us what that program was and how you started it?</p>
<p>Ruth Chiang :</p>	<p>When SMU started, I was holding two portfolios. I was Director of Student Life as well as Director of Career Planning. It was called Office of Career Planning, OCPP, Placement and Planning. So I said, "Alright, perhaps we should change it to career services so that it's not just Placement and Planning but Career Services". At that point in time, not many people knew about SMU. We had quickly set up a two-story building, and taxi drivers brought our potential employers to SIM at Clementi and they would call, "Oh Ruth, we are at Clementi. Where should we go?"</p> <p>To start with we've got nothing to show the employers. How do we then "sell" our product that they were good enough for the market place? So we went around to all the employers. (Our) skin was very thick, the shoes wore out; we knocked at their doors, we spoke to the employers, "tell us what you like and what you don't like about the people that you hired. And what kind of people can we train to meet your needs?" So then they gave us a slew of things that they didn't like and "could you do this? Could you change this? Could you change mindsets? Could you give us people we could use? And who can be put on the job and they can run?" So that got us thinking. I think one of the great assets that we had then was that we didn't have any baggage. We just looked at (what the) market needs, and if the market needed that, then how do we get our people, our products, to meet the needs of the market. So we then started with Finishing Touch.</p> <p>So I (spoke with) the best student, who had a 4.3 GPA, and said, "Alright, show me your CV, your resume." Then okay, this was before we polished it up. And then I said, Alright, let me help you write a better CV that will bring out who you are, what you are capable of and the qualities that employers would want to look at." So I polished up his CV; of course working with him, not just editing for him, and then I brought this to senior management. I said, "Look. This was your best student's CV, he had gone for some career planning, some training, and this was (his CV) before and this (CV) was after we polished it. Tell me, do they need this (finishing Touch Module)?" No quarrels after that. Yes, they need it. So we started Finishing Touch.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>You were describing the first OnTrac what was used. Can you tell us about that?</p>
<p>Ruth Chiang :</p>	<p>Okay. Technology is important right? It helps facilitate our work. And it's a platform but it's not an end in itself. So, OnTRAC ,by the way, is an acronym for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On: for Online, because we live in the worldwide web, it's online, so everybody goes online, it makes access much easier. • T: It meant for training. We do a lot of training so we want students to get access to training, to training materials, to the training events, the workshops that we have.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • And then, the “R” is for recruitment. So employers could say, “hey there’s a portal. I don’t need to depend on the third party. I don’t need to even depend on the career services to get access to the students, the potential hirers. I can put my opportunity out. I could suss out the people quickly for recruitment.” And you know time is of the essence. • “A” is for attachment. At SMU, internship is compulsory. I am so happy that it is compulsory, and it has borne fruit right? You see now everybody now wants to go for an industrial attachment, because it will make a difference to their life. So “A” is for attachments, for internship. • And also for “C” is community service.
Patricia Meyer:	<p>You talked about how the employers can see the CVs and get to know the perspective of employees and students. Could you step back and just tell us at the very beginning how did you go about introducing that very first class of graduates to the employers and what were the challenges at that time?</p>
Ruth Chiang :	<p>In fear and trembling because the first batch came in in 2000 right and I think a few of them were fast-trackers, so they wanted to graduate in 2003. That was the year SARS hit us. It was really bad because, you know, nobody is doing anything. The economy was greatly affected, especially with travel, everybody gets paranoid.</p> <p>So it was into that situation where we had the first few graduates. How did we put our graduates out there?</p> <p>(In 2004) So the economy was slow to pick up. That means hiring was not going to be at the top of their minds. So how do we get the students to be seen by the employers? Of course we had the value of internship. Some of the employers get to see them during the internship period. Then we had to ‘sell’ the (graduating) students. We invited the employers onto campus and to interact with our students and to have a sense of the ‘products’ that we are putting out to them. So we had networking sessions like “An evening under the stars”. It was in the Bukit Timah Campus.</p> <p>Then we had other sessions where we brought industry speakers to come in and interact with our students. And I am so happy that during the interaction, and our first batch was really very good, they told me, “Ruth, your university is really different. I feel the vibes.” They feel the vibes and I remember once we brought in the CEO of DBS. And he had a session with the students and there were our students putting up their hands and asking very intelligent questions, practical ones, not just theoretical. And then he answered and he took notice of a (particular) student. As we walked him out, he turned to his HR fellow and said, “Get the name of that student. I want to hire him.” So it is the students that were starring. So we need to put these ‘stars’ into the hands of the employers.</p> <p>We can’t have everybody (employers) come in. So we got the students to compile their CVs. “Come, put all your CVs together and we then market you.” Then we heard from the employers, “I’m looking for a person with this and this and these qualities.” “Ah, I know the exact person who fits your requirement. So here’s the CV. Read (about) this guy. Try him out. Interview him.” We did the matching. But that is only because we knew the ‘products’, and which ‘product’ will sell to which employer. So we needed to intimately know our students and know the needs of the employers. Sometimes if you just read advertisements, you miss it because it is so generic. You don’t know. So developing that relationship with the employers was so critical and to give them quick response, and say “hey these are three people (you can consider).” The response was “Ruth I cannot imagine this. You just gave me the CVs within just</p>

	<p>a few minutes.” “Yes, I have them ready, I know who they were. I think they will fit your requirement. Have a look at them. If they are not good (enough), let me have a look again. Maybe I didn’t understand your requirements”.</p> <p>So that was how we put the first batch out and it was a partnership (effort). We had to work with the students, very intensely, and we’ve got to work with our employers. So then I am glad that our first batch all got hired. And not only hired, they went to “Wow” places that you thought, “oh we are a young university, nobody would hire us (our graduates)” but they went to the great MNCs, the banks, we even had the first \$100000 student (student earning more than \$100,000 pa).</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>We will ask you more about the internship. You work, working with the Accountancy to really help the Accountancy students and their internship. Can you tell us about that?</p>
<p>Ruth Chiang :</p>	<p>I think that’s also where SMU became very different. Well we have a 4-year accountancy program, versus a 3-year accountancy program in other universities. So why do our students spend one more year? So how then do we place them as valued employees with the Big 4, the big accounting firms in Singapore? So we had a deep conversation with them. And you know the accounting industry, the Big 4, came together and they agreed on certain things. So we brought them back to the table and asked, “What is your major need?” And we want to make internship compulsory and we are offering you these kids for 10 weeks against 8 weeks, which was currently practiced. So they told us what they didn’t like, “Please don’t send me anymore interns during your summer break because that’s the lull period for the accounting industry. We don’t need more hands. And they are not learning much. If you want to give them the deep dive, come in when it is our peak period and we can use them, we can really test them and they can really contribute.” So when’s your peak-period? “December to February/ March” That’s during term time. How could we send our students there?</p> <p>So beside the all-rounded program that we give our accountancy students, we needed to meet the needs of the employers. “Some universities were already supplying our needs for that summer period. We don’t need more”.</p> <p>So I had a deep conversation with the (then) Dean (of Accountancy). “Here’s our issue. What can we do about this? Can we make some adjustments to the curriculum, to the calendar so that your students will get an extraordinary, real-life, deep-dive into their accounting industry? And that would also mean that they would get first offers for jobs if they did well. So is there any possibility of shifting the term? Making some adjustments?”</p> <p>It was really difficult. You had to move the curriculum and the Registrar’s Office. You had to move the instructors. Who would want to teach during a modified term? And then you have to tell the students that there’s going to be some changes to their lives:[You can’t go (on holiday) with the other students. You come (back) to term when people are already having holidays.] So we sat down and I am really grateful to (Prof Pang) Yang Hoong, the Dean of the Accounting School. She said, “We will do something.” So she had conversations with her faculty. I think these were really great professors who understood the need to serve the community as well. They agreed that we will do a modified term so that we can release our students for the peak-period in the accounting industry, for them to have a deep-dive into the attachments. And the students, who did well, would get the first jobs. And they (did) get job offers, and they know what it takes, and they get to be in the front of their bosses, their potential bosses. So if they’re really good, they get picked up very</p>

	easily because they are doing real work. So, I think, kudos to the Accountancy School and to the Dean. They sacrificed for the good of the students.
Patricia Meyer:	The graduate employment survey was another thing that your office developed. Can you tell us about why that's done? Why that's released publicly? How is it used?
Ruth Chiang :	<p>We needed to know how our students fared. So for the first batch of undergraduates, we tracked them down personally and we knew them by name. We called them, we found out what they did and how they were doing. In fact, we are (still) in touch with some of the first batch of graduates. You know, we meet them on the road while they are doing so well these days. So we tracked them because we wanted to know how they were doing. We don't have longitudinal studies, which actually maybe Alumni (office) might want to do this. (It would be good to find out): How they started? Where did they go? What helped them? And what were the success factors? Where have they been? So probably that would be something (we could do going forward)...</p> <p>At the end of the day, we wanted to see where our students went. What did they do? What is the market for them? What distinguishes them from the others? It was because we wanted to know. That's why we tracked the first batch of graduates. I think as we grew, the Ministry of Education said, hey I want to know too: - Not only your university but every other university, And to then make it (the information) public.</p> <p>It was in our interest to let the communities, the larger community, know that SMU students have done well and they are in demand. People (employers) like the SMU hires. And they (our graduates) have gone places. I think that's an accolade for the kind of education we provide in SMU. It was important to let people know how our graduates were doing.</p> <p>And I think for these few years the Ministry had (introduced), instead of every university doing their own and you can't compare (data), they now have a joint graduate employment survey (annually). That means same questions are being asked, same time periods (used) and (using the) same format for presenting your data and (for) reporting. So it's standardized across the universities now.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	About 2011, you are going to make a change in your career in SMU. You also started an award for interns then. Can you tell us a little bit about the award?
Ruth Chiang :	<p>I believe so much in internship. And I want that to continue. If I can get people, students inspired that they would do their best at the internship, that's half the battle won. So I wanted to create an Award that will carry on that legacy, that will get students to think, "Hey! I want to do well in my internship. I want to do something different. I just don't want to be the 'run-of-the-mill'. I want to contribute more. I want to put my heart and soul into this and contribute to my employer and to make a difference." So if they can imbibe that value, I think that's great. So I didn't want them to lose the message about internship.</p> <p>I also gave a grant for community service as well. So we support a group in Cambodia that will take students off the street and give them enrichment programs and to care for them. So I said, "Alright I would like to have a group of students (taking on the project). This is the money they have annually. I want them to go in</p>

	and do something with the students there.” So I guess you put your money where your mouth is, to internship and to community service.
Patricia Meyer:	And how did you change your work in 2011? What did you do next? Can you tell us about that?
Ruth Chiang :	<p>Okay. You know it’s a dream come true. And I told you when I first started I looked at all the wonderful facilities that we had in other career centers, career services in the U.S and other places. I said “why can’t we have this for our students?” And back in my mind, (I see that) we have simulation labs, we have all sorts of labs. Why can’t we simulate the corporate working environment? So as the students step up into that plate, the floor plate, they are stepping into a corporate working environment. They encounter the working environment before they actually go to the place of work. If I could simulate that, that would be great. And because we also have people coming in from overseas to interview, and even now employers come to SMU to use our interview rooms (it had to be of a corporate standard). So, why can’t I have that? And the interview is typically, you know, one or two of them (employers), with the student. Do I need a huge meeting room for two or three people? Why can’t I better use that asset? Can I have smaller rooms? Could I have smaller syndicate rooms? Can I have technology that’s so wired that should New York want to interview my student, yes it can be done with today’s technology. Yes, it can be done but they need a conducive environment and they need a (good) place. So, all these things were working in my mind. Some people have asked me “When do you want these things done? What can we do for you?” But nothing came out of it. Okay we will work (and make do) with the (given) office space.</p> <p>One day, Joan Toh, one of the ladies with the Office of Advancement [(then) - came to my office and said], “Ruth, let me introduce you to Dato’ Kho Hui Meng.” It came out of the blue, I was totally unprepared. He asked me, “What is your dream? Tell me your dream. I want to do something for the students.” I told him my dream, “Go ahead. Give me a proposal. Do it.” Wow, I had the opportunity to dream and to make it come true. So you know, we put in facilities for training, we put in facilities for smaller meeting rooms, we wired it with the technology, we created the space for networking and we created the whole corporate environment. So when you step up into the 7th floor, the atmosphere changes. And that’s what we want for the students. So I stayed back to help finish that dream – working with the contractors, the designers (and put) everything (in place) - small little details like the wiring, and the facilities and all that. And also the (revamped) Finishing Touch.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	What changes do you see on the horizon looking ahead for SMU?
Ruth Chiang	<p>I really hope that we’ll keep true to our mission, that we will still have a soul here. I guess the temptation is with so many people, it’s just churning them out. And we’ve got to make education relevant, relevant to the changing times, relevant to the needs of the society. And that we are at the forefront, and we should be leaders and not followers. We should be on the cutting edge and not just reacting. We should think ahead. We should say, is this the right thing? We should be critical of ourselves and see are we doing the right thing? Are we still fulfilling that niche that we have? Are we really different? The question is: are we really so different? And we share that term, “At SMU you are different”, I thought actually came from the employers, who came onto the campus, “You are different”. Is that a good difference? I hope so. Initial years we said, difference doesn’t mean better. Different means, “You are different.” I hope you can say you are unique, you are relevant. You stay relevant. You stay connected. With the many things that we do, sometimes we can get so distracted that we just do things. Where are we going? Is it necessary? And I think</p>

	we don't just bury our head and say, "We are an academia; we don't do this." I think we are an academia with a difference. I hope we can still continue to create that kind of impact that we have created when we first started.
Patricia Meyer:	That leads to my last question. Any advice for SMU students or SMU graduates?
Ruth Chiang	Work with the career services. Come with an open mind. Come with that authenticity, that honesty, and put in the effort. You put in the effort in your own development then we can work with you. Don't adopt the attitude that we owe you a living because we can't. We can't make it for you. You have to work with us. We can help you navigate, we can help you get there, but a lot of effort will have to come from you. So do work with us. That's why we engage students from the very first day that they come in to university
Patricia Meyer:	Thank you.

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
BCA	Building & Construction Authority
CCL	Centre for Creative Leadership
CFA	Chartered Financial Analyst
Chicago	The University of Chicago Booth School of Business
CPS	Centre for Professional Studies
DBS	Development Bank of Singapore
Duke CE	Duke Corporate Education
EDB	Economic Development Board
IE	International Enterprise Singapore
ITC	International Trading Concentration
ITC	International Trading Institute
LKCSB	Lee Kong Chian School of Business
MAF	Master's in Applied Finance
MAS	Monetary Authority of Singapore
MEC	Maritime Economics Concentration
MPA	Maritime Port Authority
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
NYU	New York University
PGPP	Postgraduate Professional Programs
RFP	Request for Proposal
SIM	Singapore Institute of Management
SingHealth	Singapore Health Services
SME	Small-Medium Enterprise
SMU	Singapore Management University
Stern	NYU Stern School of Business
Wharton	The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania
WMI	Wealth Management Institute