

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Oral History Collection

University Heritage

2-2021

Up close and personal with SMU President Prof Lily Kong

Lily Kong

Singapore Management University, lilykong@smu.edu.sg

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



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

Citation

Kong, Lily. Up close and personal with SMU President Prof Lily Kong. (2021). 1-6.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/smu_oh/39

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 cherylids@smu.edu.sg.

Up / close and personal with SMU President Prof Lily Kong

Published in SMU Circle, February 2021

<https://alumni.smu.edu.sg/smu-circle-february-2021/prof-lily-kong>



On the occasion of SMU's coming of age, alumnus Terence Quek (MCM 2013) 'Zoomed' SMU President Professor Lily Kong, and through a host of questions discovered her leadership challenges, why she ran 248km, and how she plans to keep SMU "glowing". Here's an excerpt of their conversation.

COMING OF AGE

Terence: SMU turns 21 in 2021. To many, the number '21' signifies the coming of age, becoming an adult. In Singapore, turning 21 means you are of legal age to cast a vote at a contested election. What was it like for you when you turned 21? Was turning 21 something of great significance to you?

Prof Kong: You know, the year I turned 21 was the year I graduated. To me, the significance wasn't so much about me turning 21, but more about my graduation. Graduation, in many ways, is a commencement rather than an end point. So at that time, it felt quite wonderful to have some achievements already under my belt, that I was establishing my next phase in life.

Terence: So what did you do to mark the occasion?

Prof Kong: I got a job straight away.

Terence: Wait. You got a job straight away? You mean you didn't take a gap year? Like, go on a long trip to celebrate like how most graduates would these days?

Prof Kong: Haha... No, I didn't. I wanted to give back to a family that has given me everything to support us.

Terence: So how do you see SMU's turning 21 this year? What's the significance?

Prof Kong: I see certain parallels between the human coming of age and an institution's coming of age. Coming of age is not just one point in time – it is a process of growing up, becoming more mature. For SMU, this really marks the point where we are, at our commencement; looking ahead to what we as an institution can contribute even more significantly than, you know, in our teenage years.

Terence: This year's Patron Day takes on the theme of "21 and Glowing". What does "Glowing" mean in the context of SMU?

Prof Kong: One of the wonderful things about working in the University is being surrounded by young people – and learning the lingo of young people has been part of my continuing journey! When I think of the word 'Glowing' in the conventional context, you glow when you are well and healthy. But I also realise that for young people, it's also about transmitting your aura, fulfilling your potential until you glow with

power, and you transmit that to others. That is the language of the post-millennial generation. And in that sense... very, very suitable. SMU is translating our aura at this point in time, fulfilling our full potential. We have done a great deal in the past 20 years. There is still so much more potential that we have. And this is the time for us to glow – and to grow.

ALUMNI ACTIVITIES

Terence: As glowing as the student life at SMU is, the SMU alumni community has over the years organised and participated in many events and activities. Which was your first alumni event?

Prof Kong: I cannot be certain it was the first alumni event but there was one I attended in my earlier days with SMU which left a tremendous impression on me. It was a very talented performance and what made it especially meaningful for me was that it was a combined event – not all the performers were SMU students, some were SMU alumni. I was impressed by their energy, and more so, by their commitment to the university, to come back and contribute their talent and energy alongside the students.

Terence: At the risk of getting you into trouble, which would you say would be your most memorable alumni event you took part in to date, and why?

Prof Kong: So many! I'm fighting to shortlist just one! I know Professors always tell their students not to cheat, but can I cheat on this question? There are far too many alumni events and activities that mean a lot to me. I do want to give a special shoutout to the international alumni. In my visits to other countries, I try to meet with our overseas alumni. I recall visiting Myanmar in my capacity as Provost and then as President. In my first meeting with the alumni there, I thought to myself, "what warm people they are". On my second visit, I was welcomed the way they would greet a long, lost friend. In my mind, here we have this group of alumni who remain committed to SMU, who embrace us. Their warm spirit and deep affection for SMU was extremely memorable.

Terence: I understand you do your best to participate in as many student and alumni activities as you can. I want to ask you about SMOO Challenge 2020, which was organised by the SMU Office of Advancement together with SMU students and alumni to commemorate SMU's 20th Anniversary, as well as to raise funds for the SMU student bursary. I heard you initially pledged to cover a distance of 100km to contribute to the overall target of 20,000km. Midway through, you upped your target distance to 200km, and eventually clocked 248km. Is this fact or fiction?

Prof Kong: It is a fact!

Terence: That's amazing! What prompted you to go such a distance?

Prof Kong: I'm going to use a Chinese idiom here: 走火入魔 (Zǒu Huǒ Rù Mó, meaning to have gone "crazy".) Jokes aside, once I got started, I just kept going. It was for a meaningful cause and good for my fitness too. I must also say my colleagues kept me going. Every now and then I would get an update on the distance we accumulated, and how far some of them have run, so I told myself to keep up too!

LEADERSHIP, CHALLENGES & TRAITS

Terence: You joined SMU in 2015 as Provost and in less than 5 years, climbed to the role of the President of SMU. In fact, you had taken on numerous leadership roles throughout your career. What's your take on leadership?

Prof Kong: Leadership is a privilege. An ability to make a difference. It is a facilitation of others' contribution in order to collectively make an impact, a real chance to forge a vision for an organisation that one is leading and bringing that vision to reality.

Terence: Being in leadership positions all through your career, what would you say would be some leadership challenges you faced or are facing?

Prof Kong: I'm going to talk about age and gender. I was made a Dean at the age of 35. That was my first major leadership position. From whichever standard you use, the age of 35 would be considered a young age. I found "age" to be a challenge not because I couldn't do the job or lack the ability. Age was

a challenge because I had naysayers around. I recall a senior colleague making this remark to me: "I'm used to working with people with 35 years of experience, not 35 years of age".

Terence: I can't imagine someone actually said that to your face. That's unfair and uncalled for. In this day, it would have been a crime – almost.

Prof Kong: Yes, I was thinking, how do I respond to that? The only thing I feel I could do was to rise above that and show this colleague that I am worthy of the trust. But that was many years ago. It was a different time back then, in an institutional context where seniority by age means everything. It was at a time of a shake-up in that institution which was trying to say that it is not biological age, but what the person can bring to the role that matters. And so, kudos to the institution for being willing to appoint me.

Terence: What about gender?

Prof Kong: I never thought gender was a big challenge for me because I've always had opportunities. This year being the year when we are paying attention to equity in the gender sphere – I have had comments made to me, like "Oh, as a woman, you've got all these family responsibilities, how can you possibly think about taking the next role?"

I think comments like this come from being well-meaning, but at the same time, an assumption about one's circumstances and ability to rise to the occasion. If I were to be in that well-meaning person's position, I would have said: "You have a lot of abilities. Let us support you, in the juggling of your various responsibilities." It's just a different take on things. Through this, I've learnt to be affirming of other people, not make assumptions. Let them make the decision about what they can or cannot do, would like to or would not like to do. If the person has the ability, don't assume circumstances will not allow that person to fulfil his or her potential.

Terence: That's some food for thought you just gave on age and gender. Let's go back to leadership, and specifically, leadership traits. You probably have a lot more, but I'm going to make things difficult for you – what would you say are three top leadership traits you think are relevant in today's world?

Prof Kong: You're right – I think there are many, but I will probably distil them to these three. One of them is going to sound somewhat hackneyed, and commonplace, and you're going to think, nothing exciting here. But I really believe this to be an important leadership trait: Vision, having the vision of getting us to a better place, or doing something in a different and much better way.

For example, the vision of a healthy and equitable world is so critical in a leader especially at this time, because we are all fighting day to day challenges. It is easy to be a manager and to lose sight of the vision, and forget to be a leader. And that's why even though everybody was very busy last year dealing with COVID-19, I was quite insistent to say that we not lose sight of our Vision 2025, to continue our work simultaneously to achieve that. So that's one leadership trait - being able to rise above the day-to-day management while continuing to keep an eye on the vision, and to generate excitement around that vision.

Terence: So, having a vision, and focusing on the vision while rising above the challenges. What's the second?

Prof Kong: I want to talk about the connection between having a vision and being able to lead an organisation towards that. Not good just having a vision if you can't translate that into projects, initiatives, systems, processes, and so forth. We all know that a vision is only as good as its implementation. So for me, it's important to have the ability to zoom-out and say: "This is the big vision. Come on, guys, don't lose sight of this vision" and then zoom-in on some of the details, systems, processes, and having our finger on the pulse of the project and being able to push things along.

Terence: Zoom-out, zoom-in. Got it. What's your third?

Prof Kong: The third for me would be the ability to climb into someone's shoes and walk around in them, to see others' perspectives. A leader needs to have a certain level of confidence, but if a leader is overconfident in what he or she believes in or thinks, and doesn't try to climb into others' shoes and walk around in them, then we are losing something.

OPPORTUNITIES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Terence: Very nice. And I can see how apt your three leadership traits are given today's context. I hope our alumni get a chance to put these three leadership traits into practice. I want to shift to talk about opportunities broadly. You mentioned earlier that you had many opportunities, and in fact, you never failed to make the fullest use of those opportunities to fulfil your potential, to the point of you receiving numerous accolades.

You are often introduced as the “first woman Provost of a publicly-funded university”, and “first woman and first Singaporean academic to helm a Singapore university”. You also made it to Forbes Asia's Power Businesswomen List. In a time when gender and diversity issues are making it into the Boardroom, it's understandable that you are often made a “poster girl” for breaking glass ceilings, gender equality, and woman leadership. What do these titles mean to you?

Prof Kong: It is a privilege, and it comes with a responsibility. I am increasingly aware of that responsibility. With the accolades, at first, I accepted them as a real honour and privilege. I accepted them with great humility. Then, as I proceeded on this journey, I realised it is a responsibility because, well, I can either do this well and show the way for others, or make a mess and prove naysayers right. So, it is a responsibility, and one that I don't wear lightly. I often remind myself that I should be mindful of the opportunities that I can offer to others, and to be mindful of the support that I should give to others. I'm grateful to be given a somewhat pivotal role – at least in the space of higher education in Singapore – which can demonstrate what is possible to others, to open up the field to many others like me, whether it be someone younger, or a woman.

Terence: So the accolades come with a responsibility to inspire others.

Prof Kong: Well, I never thought of myself as an inspiration, but I have people – for instance, young women - come up to me to say: “if there is something you would like to do – a project, an initiative, a mission that you have – feel free to be able to call upon me to help.” And this includes SMU alumni as well. And that's been heart-warming. And so I feel that sense of responsibility of opening up opportunities and bringing others along with me on the journey.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Terence: Speaking of responsibilities, I'm sure you had your hands full over the last two years. I recall hearing your speech at your inauguration as President of SMU in early 2019. You were just starting to implement your game plan when COVID-19 hit our shores in 2020. What was the impact of COVID-19 on your plans for the university?

Prof Kong: In 2014, my predecessor had articulated Vision 2025, and in 2019, we were at a nice point to reflect on the journey thus far, and what we wanted to achieve in the next phase. It was timely to take stock and think: what do we want to achieve for the next five years? We started the journey of asking ourselves those questions, and thinking of the five-year strategic plans that would flesh out the vision. In December 2019, we said we were going to focus on some areas and were going to take our ideas to the larger community to seek their inputs and affirmation. And then COVID-19 struck. If there was something we couldn't do, it was to talk to the community in-person about our strategies. So there was a hiatus as we turned our attention to dealing with COVID-19. But I see this as a good hiatus, because amidst all the trouble, it was an opportunity for me, as a new President to pull people together to fight a common enemy – COVID-19.

In a sense, it brought us together. Even though we weren't talking about our strategy, or plans and projects and initiatives, we were coming together as a team. We built a sense of common purpose and camaraderie. I think it would have been difficult, or at least it would have taken me a longer time, without a crisis to pull everyone together. I felt that team spirit. We entered our COVID-19 meeting room as a Crisis Executive Group. We exited as a team. I hope we continue our journey together as a team. I am confident we will. I have been hugely encouraged.

FUTURE OF SMU

Terence: On that note, let's talk about the future. In a phrase, what would you say is the future of SMU?

Prof Kong: I would use one word. "Glowing".

Terence: Nice. So with five more years to go, what would you put on a report card on SMU?

Prof Kong: Our graduates, like their predecessors – the alumni, are well sought after at the workplace. I am so proud of our alumni. Every time I hear feedback from employers, it is about how our graduates - our SMU alumni - stand apart. There is a difference. And we must keep or sharpen that even further, so that our graduates will be well sought, whether it is in business, government or society.

Our colleagues are making a difference to the world through their research. And their research is not only speaking to other academics, but is also making a difference to business, government and society. That businesses, government and society will say: "We are changing our policies, because of SMU research, and society becomes a better place."

Our staff have a role as well – so many universities think about their students and their faculty – they forget to think about their staff. This will not be the university under my watch. Our staff are as much engaged in making SMU a green and sustainable university that is relevant for Asia, and a digitally transformed one as well.

When people think of a model of an engaged city university – they think of SMU.

Terence: In your President's State of the University Address 2020, you identified three areas of focus ("where to play") for the next five years, namely Digital Transformation, Sustainable Living, and Growth in Asia. In recent times, there seems to be a shift of focus away from 'global' to 'local'; and for some in our region, that is a shift from, say, Asia to Southeast Asia. Some might argue that we are not paying enough attention to Southeast Asia. I'm curious why you are focusing on Asia, and not on Southeast Asia.

Prof Kong: This is a really good question – you cut right into the heart of the debate that we had – whether to focus on Asia or Southeast Asia. There was a lot of discussions, different perspectives and views. Some said Southeast Asia plus China. Some said Southeast Asia plus India. Or South Asia. Or East Asia. And many other permutations. As a leader, I heard all of these, and I took the call to go with 'Asia'. I feel our futures are entwined with Asia, not just Southeast Asia alone. Certainly, China and India are very big markets, and we have a lot of alumni and students based there as well. This is not to the exclusion of other parts of Asia or the world, but Southeast Asia, China and India fit in with what we want to do. It is a bit of a mouthful to say "Southeast Asia, China and India", so easier to go with 'Asia'. I also want to acknowledge that South Korea is a popular destination among our students and alumni too!

ROLE OF ALUMNI

Terence: You also spoke of three strategies ("How to play") you would adopt – specifically, 'Transformative Education', 'Cutting Edge Research' and 'Engaged City University'. And to help the University achieve its vision, you highlighted a set of enablers ("How to win") which include the four 'I's you introduced in your inaugural address as President of SMU – Industry, Innovation, Internationalisation, and Integration; which you call the 'SMU Differentiators'. With this very clear strategy and plan to move ahead, what role do you see the SMU alumni play in helping SMU achieve its 2025 vision?

Prof Kong: I'm so delighted with this question. I really want to work with the alumni – there are so many ways that we can work together, to help SMU glow and grow, and at the same time, there can be useful opportunities for the respective organisations that the alumni are with.

Let me step through the strategy. We have a vision – where to aim – and that is Vision 2025. To translate that vision, we must articulate our priorities or "Where to play", and they are: Digital Transformation, Sustainable City Living, and Growth in Asia.

We have to ask ourselves how we are going to play, and so I've identified three areas: – Transformative Education, Cutting Edge Research and Engaged City University. "How to win" would be the enablers, and these are the four 'I's that I believe will differentiate SMU. Industry – to engage with industry in small

and big ways. Innovation – we are involved in and contribute to the innovation value chain. Internationalisation – to expand our footprint and connections. Integration – how we work as oneSMU – and that includes working with our alumni.

I hope we will be able to work with our alumni in various ways, such as for employment. We hope to send some of our students as interns to your organisations. If you have a challenge and you need people to look at it, you might think of SMU-X courses where our students can come and work with you as a mentor together with a faculty mentor, and by the end of the semester, they may deliver a solution to you that you can use at your workplace. In that sense, our alumni can represent “Industry”. Some of you may be interested in ‘Innovation’ or ‘Entrepreneurship’. You would want to have a place that you can incubate your ideas, network with others, where you can come for master classes – I hope we can be that platform for you to learn from others. In ‘Internationalisation’, we are establishing overseas centres for a start, in Jakarta and Bangkok, and especially for those of you who are working there or if you are based there, you can help us in that journey, because you understand those markets better. In turn, I hope our journey in providing continuing education can translate into Academy courses and Executive Development programmes that you and your colleagues can benefit from to remain relevant to the workplace. And these are just some ideas.

Terence: Looks like there is a lot the alumni can look forward to in the days ahead. Before we close, circling back to where we started, on the occasion of SMU turning 21, what message do you have for the alumni?

Prof Kong: You can be justly proud of your alma mater. Our ‘glowing and growing’ reputation is built on what you do. The reputation of the university is built on its people and the alumni is a huge part of that. I hope that you will uphold the good name of the university, remain connected, and that SMU is of value to you, and that you will find the energy and time to contribute to your alma mater. Thank you!

About the Writer



Terence Quek, PBM (MCM 2013)

CEO, Emergenetics APAC

www.linkedin.com/in/terencequek/

Terence graduated with a Master of Science in Communication Management (MCM) from SMU in 2013. He has been giving back to his alma mater over the years in various capacities - as a member of the SMU Alumni Advisory Council and the SMU Philanthropic Committee, and was the Founding President of the MCM Alumni Group and a member of the Lee Kong Chian School of Business Alumni Board. In recognition of his significant contributions to SMU, he was conferred the SMU Alumni Rising Star Award in 2015.

Last updated on 27 Feb 2021