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Oral History Interview with Sharon Tan: Growing SMU

Sharon TAN

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Sharon Tan

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 26 March 2014

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 Pat Meyer. Today is Wednesday, the 26th of March, 2014. Today's interview is a part of the Conceptualizing SMU oral history project and it's being held at the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library at Singapore Management University. Today I will be speaking with Sharon Tan about your recollections and your perspective on the early day of SMU and your role as Director of Corporate Communications and Director of the Office of Advancement and Alumni. Just to start, I would like to ask you to give us a little background on your career before you joined us here.
Sharon Tan:	I started in corporate communication, PR [public relations], corporate affairs before moving into arts management at a little art center, The Substation, and then moving on to Cirque du Soleil, the French-Canadian circus, before coming to SMU. So it's rather a different sort of background from an educational career. And I have been more than ten years with SMU now.
Patricia Meyer:	How did you first hear about SMU? What was your first contact about this new university?
Sharon Tan:	Actually, when they called me for interview. Well briefly, I guess, in the media I've heard of the launch on Bras Basah Park, when they first launched the university. The first convocation, I believe, was held on Bras Basah Park. So I read about it in the papers, and also Kwon Ping [Ho Kwon Ping] defending SMU being sited here and the removal of National Library then. I knew about it because I was working in this area at The Substation then. So, to be part of the university then, I guess, was such a thrill because it's not every day that you get a new university starting, and it's not every day that you have the opportunity to be involved, I guess, with shaping the profile and reputation of the university.
Patricia Meyer:	What risks did you see for yourself in joining this new venture?
Sharon Tan:	Not at all. I mean, you know that this is supported by MOE [Ministry of Education] and you know you come in fresh. But I guess to be part of that early team of management was really, you know we were small and we were committed and it was the thrill of a pioneering team to be able to start many things. I mean, we started, in my department specifically, we started the corporate identity guideline. We sort of laid the foundation for many things that we do in terms of branding now. We did sort of a big brand review and exercise in terms of how we want to position the university. I think the success of SMU's branding was the fact that it's authentic. We were able to look within what the university was trying to do and we were able to hear what the students wanted the university to be, how the team wanted the university to be and to create that profile. It was really, really quite exciting.
Patricia Meyer:	I just want to ask when you first joined the university, what was happening in corporate communication at that time? And you mentioned branding was one of the things. Was that one of your first priorities when you started work?
Sharon Tan:	Yes. I recall the first project was really the advertising campaign for SMU and thankfully that turned out to be hugely successful—the jumping student ad and the

	<p>“SMU, we’re different” tagline. It was really the first time that a local tertiary institution has such a branding effort. Because before that, most of the advertisements were informational. I mean, they were listing the courses and all that, and nobody did, you know, sort of a huge picture of a student jumping and tagline like what we had done.</p> <p>And that success of the campaign really was also because we were able to do a parallel media campaign. We were pitching stories of the students of SMU, at least two stories a week, pushing out a lot of media stories along with the branding ads. We were inviting the media to come and experience, attend classes, and experience, you know, the SMU difference, the small classrooms, and that was really how that whole campaign, I think, resonated with the community. The messaging in terms of the different pedagogy, the flexibility in the curriculum, the broad-based approach, us producing more creative, confident, articulate students. I think that really hit the right note with the community, whether it was the employers, potential employers, the parents, the potential students. They were all excited to see something so different then.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	Was that typical of the universities in Singapore to offer something like that?
Sharon Tan:	No, I don’t think they’ve even done media lunches before. So we were probably the first to open our doors, roll out the red carpet, get the media to meet our faculty and senior management, and just to openly talk about SMU. I must really credit the senior management for being so open and responsive to the media because it made my job then so much easier. And I think it has also built that trust and rapport with the media which was so important and so helpful for the subsequent years when we have to manage a media crisis or in a crisis communication. That trust and rapport have already been built over the years.
Patricia Meyer:	Did they continue or were they for a period that you had the media lunches? Was that event an annual event or?
Sharon Tan:	Yes, it was an annual event.
Patricia Meyer:	I wanted to ask about the branding, the tagline, these early images that we all think of for SMU, and also how your corporate communications work together with admissions in promoting the university to prospective students and their families.
Sharon Tan:	(10.50) I think after the first branding campaign that was done from corporate communication, we kind of moved the whole marketing portfolio fully to admissions. And then we would be just really supporting the marketing effort, because from then onward we were really doing just media relations, corporate affairs, reputational management and all. So we were supporting more the marketing effort broadly. (11.23)
Patricia Meyer:	I would like to look at some of the events early in SMU’s life and the role that corporate communication play in them. One was at the Bukit Timah campus, there

	was a homecoming celebrating 75 years of learning at that campus. Can you just tell us about that?
Sharon Tan:	We conceptualized that 75 th year of Bukit Timah campus because I think, in a way, we wanted to be part of the history of Bukit Timah campus. That was SMU making its mark in terms of using that campus and being part of that tradition because most of the educational institutions in Singapore have, at some point, started or have gone through that campus. The other was also because at that point we didn't have alumni at all. We wanted the alumni of the Bukit Timah campus to be part of SMU. And it was also in that broad sense of corporate relations, engaging this community because the alumni at Bukit Timah campus were also very successful folks in the local community, and we wanted them to know of SMU and to be aware of what we are about and to feel a part of SMU and the development of SMU. So that was the thinking behind the celebration of the 75 th anniversary.
Patricia Meyer:	And the very first group of undergraduates who'd done four years at SMU, graduated in 2004. What did corporate communication, how did they prepare for that first commencement?
Sharon Tan:	<p>I think doing corporate communication then wasn't just, we did not just...of course we focused on what we were supposed to do in corporate communication, the different tasks and all. But we were so involved in very strategic decisions. It just goes beyond just the task, the narrow function of corporate communication. We were able to feedback to management in terms of the decision to be taken. So, for example, I think generally, SMU as a whole during that period, there was a very strong, sort of empowerment of the students, involving the students, consulting the students. Corporate communication played a role in that. You could also call that internal communication, but there was a big engagement of the students, whether involving them in a lot of the big events planning or organization, or consulting them on some key decision, involving them in deciding how the campus would be, sort of telling them way ahead how that new campus would be, taking their inputs and feedback and all into all this.</p> <p>One big example of this whole empowerment is during the first fee adjustment—can't remember when that was, about 2005. When we were deciding on the first fee adjustment, the students actually were very concerned and the Student Association then led by Ford Lai [Ford Lai Chih-Ching]—I still remember the president of the Student Association—came together and they worked very hard and they put together a paper to appeal for a lock-in system, instead of having fee increase every year and impacting the existing students. Sort of just to introduce the fee adjustment during first year and then it's locked in for four years so that they could plan their finances. And after consulting with the university administration, the administration actually took that idea and implemented that idea. So it turned the very difficult situation with the students into something very positive. And I remember the media sort of really lapped it up because it was such a nice story of the university administration or the bureaucracy listening to the students and the students' effort in putting together the paper and it turned out so well.</p>

Patricia Meyer:	Very positive example.
Sharon Tan:	I also want to highlight in term of the students' empowerment. The fact that we took a risk to bring the first commencement, you know, the first commencement was such a big, significant event and I took a risk to give the video project to a student to do—instead of a professional company—because he came with this really interesting idea of doing animation involving the students and faculty and staff. That video was played during the commencement and I was just...it was an interesting video. But it actually helped that student to get the nomination with the Golden Horse Award, some sort of animation nomination. And also, subsequently, he started his own movie production animation business. I like that sort of story.
Patricia Meyer:	Would you say that SMU engaged or asked for more from the students then had been typically done at the universities?
Sharon Tan:	I would think so. I think it's also ... it's the whole ethos of the university. I think that sort of recognized students as individuals and wanted to hear from them and wanted to involve them and also empower them to be involved in the development of the university. But it is also the very, I guess it's so contextual because it is that pioneering spirit where the students also feel like they want to be part of shaping the university, and being involved in many different things. I mean they were starting student clubs and they wanted to initiate this and that. And it was that very special energy, I think, that comes with because you are starting in a new institution, you are part of that pioneering group.
Patricia Meyer:	The city campus, there were so many aspects to that: finding the site, how the university would be designed for the site, the move, the opening. Can you tell us a little about, because that was a multi-year effort?
Sharon Tan:	<p>It was quite amazing because here we were pitching, you know, the city campus, how it would be, getting the architect's drawing and seeing that thing come up over the years, and finally it being ready. Through that huge consultation process, whether it's student or staff or faculty, in terms of the needs and being involved with the signages, the colors. I mean it was really...I'm really, really glad to be a part of that team to get the campus ready.</p> <p>And also, of course, that big move from Bukit Timah campus to the city campus. We had a big, colorful procession all the way from Bukit Timah. We even had to close part of Orchard Road so that we could come down Orchard Road into Bras Basah to make an entrance into Bras Basah. So the year itself when we moved to the city campus, we had MM Lee, former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, here to launch Li Ka Shing Library with Mr. Li Ka Shing himself. Then we had former SM [Senior Minister] Goh Chok Tong to open Lee Kong Chian School of Business with the Lee family. Then we had PM Lee [Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong] at the grand opening of the city campus. So that was all within one year.</p>

	<p>And continuing that, we organized a lot of community outreach, inviting MPs [members of Parliament], ministers, representatives from different agencies, statutory boards, different sort of communities in the society to come to the campus. That was such a great opportunity to also introduce SMU and what we do and how we do things differently to the community. We also actively reached out to the institutions around us, the art institutions, the art schools. We were sharing spaces with them, welcoming them, actually, to use the city campus, such as the Singapore Art Show, the Biennale, the Literary Festival, the Night Festival, so much so that actually we were the first local university to win the Friend of the Arts award. I think maybe the rest didn't think to put themselves out to be nominated for that, but because of what we were doing with all these different art insitutions and art schools and that outreach, I think we've won that award for a couple of years.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>There's some images I recall of you with ministers and members of Parliament viewing the arts as part of their tour of the campus. What was their reaction, to see this new university?</p>
<p>Sharon Tan:</p>	<p>I think the intent of having a campus in the city really was to enliven this area, and also for the university really to engage with the community, with the business community, with the arts community, the civics community. So I think when they came for that visit, they were definitely pleased to see part of the Singapore Art Show on our campus green, and to see different people, the public coming through the city campus. I think that was meeting the objectives of having the campus in the city. But, of course, more than that, we were introducing them to the stuff that we do here, sending our students for internships and having this business community coming through to talk to our students, to engage with our faculty and all. That was energy of a city campus.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>I think it was in 2003, you took on some of the stewardship responsibilities of the Advancement Office. Can you tell us a little bit about what that involved?</p>
<p>Sharon Tan:</p>	<p>Before I took on the advancement portfolio officially in 2008, I did a six-month interim in 2004 while they were searching for the director for advancement. That was interesting because I went right smack—without advancement experience then—right smack into the stewardship of the biggest gift to SMU then. It was the stewardship of that landmark gift, \$50-million gift from the Lee Foundation. It was then the largest private gift to a university [in Singapore]. With the government match of \$150 million, it became a \$200-million gift which makes it one of the biggest gifts internationally, I think, to a university. So we did a lot of things in term of stewardship.</p> <p>We actually produced a CNA [Channel NewsAsia] documentary on Lee Kong Chian. And so I had to go and interview his family members, friends who knew him then, and pull together the research together with the CNA producer—which was also good because we were able to capture then on the website the life of this man, who has the foresight to set up the Lee Foundation and to support education in such a big way. Also part of that, not everybody's aware, it was also the first naming of a school</p>

	<p>in the local universities, because there wasn't any naming of a school then, so the Lee Kong Chian business school was the first school to be named in the local universities.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>How did that early time with advancement prepare you for when you became the director of advancement and alumni?</p>
Sharon Tan:	<p>I think given that it was such a young institution with very young alumni, I have seen quite amazing support from the community for SMU. Every gift, whether it is big or small, I think it is an endorsement on what we've done right. People don't have to give [to us, you know, they are not alumni; very few are parents and or have done things with the university. They just give because of the appeal of the SMU story. A lot of times they like what we are doing. They can see the difference that we're creating. And that's why they want to support us. Also, I believe that being small and nimble, we were able to kind of match the donor interest with the needs of the university. So that helps a lot in bringing people on board and helping them find what is meaningful to them and what the university needs to do that initiative, to proceed with the initiative.</p> <p>We were also very conscious because these people sometimes have very little to do with the university—you know, no relationship whatsoever with the university—we were very conscious in term of when we have them on board as a donor to protect that relationship, to grow that relationship as a long-term relationship. I highly emphasized with the team stewardship and accountability to the donor. And in that way, even in our short history, we were able to have repeat donors, donors who have given and then come back to give a bigger gift. Or donors who were kind enough to introduce people to us. So we had a lot of referral donors. I'm really quite touched by people who have supported the university.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>You were responsible for both corporate communications and advancement and alumni. Was there some synergy and overlap there? How did that go?</p>
Sharon Tan:	<p>The few years when I was heading up both corporate communications and advancement and alumni, even though it was officially two portfolios, it was actually three portfolios. Because advancement and alumni then, alumni wasn't really contributing to advancement. At most universities, they have alumni and advancement together because most of your donors are your alumni. But in our case, that's not the case at all. So in fact, alumni was a whole different portfolio—to engage our alumni, to nurture that bond that our alumni has with the university. So it was really three portfolios. But there's a bit of synergy in the sense that the branding, the telling of the SMU stories to the media, we have to package it in even more sophisticated form to the donor. It was really, again, telling the SMU story and convincing them that this is the place that is worthy of their support.</p>
Patricia Meyer:	<p>Ok. When you became the director of advancement and alumni, SMU's first graduates were just a few years before. And I think by commencement of 2007, the university had 2300 graduates total. So, how did you go about creating an alumni community essentially from scratch?</p>

Sharon Tan:	I think, like I mentioned before, that pioneering spirit is so precious and the aim of—when I am overseeing the alumni relations now—the aim is really to nurture this bond that the students have with the university. They may not be at the position now to give financially back to the university, which is why a lot of what we do at alumni relations now is in terms of networking, and in terms of volunteer platform. So the very successful program that we have is the mentoring program where alumni volunteer their time and take on mentorship for four months. They mentor our students, whether in term of their career choices, in term of the courses that they should take, or their curriculum planning. So that is very popular with the alumni. We have every year about 300, 400 alumni participating in that program.
Patricia Meyer:	I want to ask some reflection questions. Just looking back where the university is now compared to where it was in 2002, how does it compare with what you thought might be possible back in 2002?
Sharon Tan:	That's a tough one. I guess while we were riding on that excitement of a new institution back in 2002, we were never quite sure of how successful we would be or how far we would come. And I must say that the success of SMU is in its people, the commitment of the people who want to create something, and a very nice ethos of openness, of diversity, of kind of pushing the boundary. It's a little naughty sometimes when we do want to push things a little and be able to do things a little differently. And I think that has helped us in creating things that are a bit different from the norm, where people would find it more exciting and more dynamic and want to be engaged with and involved in. We have been able to bring on board a lot more people than we imagined, you know, who want to be a part of SMU. Now that I am doing advancement, it's a bit more externally oriented to a different community apart from media and the public; we can see individuals, influential individuals, who really like the idea of SMU and want to be a part of SMU.
Patricia Meyer:	What do you see as the challenges for SMU today, going forward?
Sharon Tan:	I hope the university will not become too institutionalized. I think that's a bit inevitable. You know, you grow to a certain size, but we have always wanted to be smaller, we've always been smaller. And I think small is an advantage in our case, small and niched in. We should always sort of be on our toes to move a bit faster, to be nimble in responding to changes and challenges, to continue to be bold in pushing the boundary a little, to be creative. I think we shouldn't be afraid to be creative in addressing the challenges.
Patricia Meyer:	Thank you very much!
Sharon Tan:	Thank you for the opportunity to share.
End of Interview	

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
CCA	Co-Curricular Activity
CNA	Channel NewsAsia
IT	Information Technology
MM	Minister Mentor
MOE	Ministry of Education
MP	Member of Parliament
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
PM	Prime Minister
PR	Public Relations
SEA	Southeast Asian
SM	Senior Minister
SMU	Singapore Management University
US	United States