

**Speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President, National University of Singapore
at Main Commencement Ceremony, 6 July 2009
University Cultural Centre**

NUS Chancellor, President S R Nathan

Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong and Mrs Lee

Minister for Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen

Pro-Chancellors Mr Ridzwan Dzafir, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow and Dr Andrew Chew

Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Wong Ngit Liong

Members of the NUS Board of Trustees

Distinguished Guests

Graduands, Parents and Families

Alumni and Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen

Facing The Future, Through The Lens Of Our Past

Graduating class of 2009, my warmest congratulations on this special day! As NUS students, you enriched our campus with your vigour, passion and idealism. As NUS graduates, you bring that same energy and talent, that same youthful optimism to Singapore and to society.

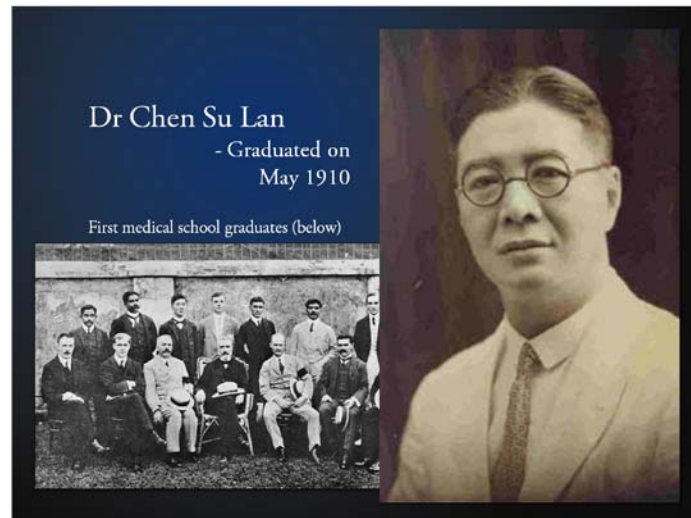
Today, you stand as part of the rich history of NUS. For over a hundred years, gifted women and men from our university have contributed much to Singapore and to the world beyond. They have made their personal marks, found fulfillment and helped the advance of society.

Today, you look to a future full of promise and potential. As you gaze at the possible paths ahead, what do you see? What are the wayposts that might guide you along the way?

In looking forward, it may be useful to start by looking back. Drawing inspiration by peering through the lens of our past.

May 1910.

Dr Chen Su Lan topped the first batch of seven graduands from the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School, from which NUS traces its roots.



He was not just a doctor, but a social reformer and philanthropist, working tirelessly to improve the difficult social conditions of that time. In the 1920s and 1930s, he led a campaign against opium addiction. In 1945, he set up the Chinese YMCA to address social problems among the youth after the Japanese Occupation. Dr Chen made many contributions and left behind a legacy of philanthropy that continues to benefit the community today through the Chen Su Lan Trust which he set up in 1947.

BOLDNESS to break new ground. This is what Dr Chen Su Lan epitomised. The issues and challenges for Singapore and for our time are very different. But the boldness to act, to make a difference, remains as pertinent and as important.

June 1986.

Ms Olivia Lum graduated with a BSc (Hons) degree from NUS. Olivia came to Singapore when she was 16 and after much effort, was finally accepted by Tiong Bahru Secondary School. To pay for her school fees, she worked as a waitress and gave tuition. Despite many setbacks, she did well and gained admission into the NUS Faculty of Science.

After graduation, she set up a small water treatment company in 1989. She spent years going up and down Malaysia on her motorbike to build up her business. Today, Hyflux, her company, has a market capitalisation of more than S\$1 billion and is one of the fastest growing firms in the Asian water market.



**Photo © NUS, used with the kind permission of Ms Olivia Lum*

Olivia and her story are truly remarkable. But for me, Olivia embodies RESOURCEFULNESS; the strength of mind and character to face adversity with courage; the ability to find fresh and better ways to overcome obstacles, the tenacity to persist despite setbacks.

June 2007.

When Jane Lee graduated from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in English Literature, she did so with honours as well as a host of sporting awards. She was in our demanding University Scholars Programme, and yet had time for many sea-sports including kayaking, dragon-boat racing and sailing. As if this was not enough, while in NUS, she scaled the Island Peak in Nepal, and climbed in China and New Zealand. Her experience with the NUS Make It Real mountaineering programme made her decide to climb Mount Everest. Jane juggled her studies with fund-raising and training, while persuading other team mates to come along.



**Photo by Chu Ngee Heng, reproduced with kind permission*

As you know, all of Singapore cheered this year when Jane led an all-women's team to the summit of the world's highest peak.

As Jane said, "there is no finite limit to human potential. I live by that challenge to always push forward beyond the present".

Her success celebrates the power of the human SPIRIT, which she stands for – the spirit of the explorer, pursuing a dream with courage and grit, open to new paths, always pushing forward, always challenging her own boundaries.

The stories of our 3 graduates span nearly a century.

Yet, the qualities that they typify – BOLDNESS, RESOURCEFULNESS, and SPIRIT – serve as a beacon and inspiration for all of us today. It is these attitudes, qualities and values that, woven together, make up the rich culture of our University. This culture, in turn, enables NUS to pursue and fulfill its most important purpose – to create and bring distinctive new value. Value for our students and graduates, value for our country and for society.

For the graduating class of 2009, the immediate future may appear fraught with difficulty. The current financial and economic crisis means that job opportunities may be more limited. Prospects for advancement and growth may be slower than before.

This is true, but you should not forget that in difficulty, lies opportunity; in adversity, the chance to grow.

The hard times will also pass. As Singapore and the rest of the world recover from the current downturn, many exciting new possibilities will spring up. Equipped with strong mental and personal skills by your education here, you can look to the future with eagerness and optimism.

I hope you will also feel moved to contribute more broadly. To play a part in constructive public discourse and action on the pressing issues and challenges of Singapore and society today. Through our individual actions, we keep alive the NUS tradition of helping those less advantaged than ourselves, of giving back to the community that has nourished and supported us for over a century.

So on this special day, you, your parents and loved ones can be justly proud of your success, and excited about your future. This year is particularly auspicious as it marks the 80th anniversary of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the Faculty of Dentistry and the Faculty of Science.

We are delighted to share your joy.

The commencement ceremony which marks your graduation today has ancient roots. It dates back to 16th-century Europe, as a way to honour students who have completed their studies and to welcome them into the community of scholars.



In this tradition, NUS is thrilled to welcome you as our newest alumni. Even after you graduate, you are still a vital part of our community. I hope that you remain deeply engaged with us, just as we will do our best to be of continuing service to you.



You have our very best wishes, as you embark on your chosen path with **BOLDNESS, RESOURCEFULNESS** and **SPIRIT**.

Thank you.

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