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New NUS President Professor Tan Chorh Chuan

Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, the new President of the National University of Singapore (NUS), has been under the media spotlight over the past year. This was after the announcement that former NUS President Prof Shih Choon Fong had been named Founding President of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia. I noticed a similarity through interviews granted by Prof Tan and Prof Chua Nam Hai, a distinguished alumnus of Catholic High School who is now with the Rockefeller University in the United States. Both of them preferred not to discuss personal matters during interviews. Prof Tan was a hero in the fight against SARS in 2003 and that had been the focus of most of his media interviews.

When I was approached by NUS to interview Prof Tan before he officially took over as its President on 1 December, I asked whether he would be willing to share more about himself. This was my reporter's instinct kicking in to look for something new. I had wanted to fill the gaps concerning those aspects of Prof Tan's life that were unknown to most, and I was glad that he agreed to such an interview.

The interview was conducted in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. We started by talking about Chinese brush painting which he enjoyed. According to Prof Tan, he had started enjoying drawing from a young age as it gave him a sense of comfort, ease and freedom. Due to his tall physique, he was seated at the back of the classroom. During lessons, he would draw in his exercise books. Prof Tan started Chinese brush painting lessons ten years ago, and he always took the effort to attend the three-hour weekend classes taught by his teacher, Goh Chiew Lye.

Although Prof Tan was English-educated, he had a good grasp of the spirit of Chinese paintings. There was a small painting of a single chrysanthemum branch on the wall of

his office that I particularly liked, as the soul of the subject was captured with just a few strokes of the brush.

When asked how he would run NUS as its President, Prof Tan linked his interest in painting with his approach in running the university. He shared with me the interesting principle of "guarding against the danger of complacency".

Prof Tan said, "All artists encounter a situation where they find it difficult to make further improvements to their work as they perceive it to be near-perfect. Since the work is already close to perfection, the artists fear that making any more adjustments could ruin the work. This is actually the most dangerous mindset to have. By not fine-tuning the work further, the artist would never be able to achieve greater levels of excellence."

What a good metaphor! Doesn't this represent the "NUS Spirit" under Prof Tan's leadership, that is, the idea that one should never stop striving for perfection?

This astute new NUS President had picked this principle of "having the courage to add new brush strokes when one has achieved a near-perfect painting" to make his point that he would not bask in past successes.

Prof Tan had also shared with me that he always demanded more from himself with each new painting. He said, "What is the point of painting 100 pieces and all of them are of the same quality?"

Prof Tan reminded me of my father who loved to play mahjong. My father once told me that the best part of a mahjong game was when the players had just shuffled the tiles and all of them would look forward to a new game with a sense of hope and excitement. It was not surprising that players had remained mesmerised throughout 24 rounds of the game because of the "hope and excitement" arising from the numerous shuffling and reshuffling of the tiles.

Prof Tan told me that every new painting depicted a fresh start, and I could also apply this in my daily work of writing news articles.

Prof Tan's principle of "guarding against the danger of complacency" had greatly inspired me. Not too long ago, I delivered a speech on how some distinguished principals of the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools had been able to "rescue" Chinese-language schools. I concluded by saying that these school principals had borrowed from the "Nantah Spirit" of "perseverance, fighting in the face of adversity, self-reliance and striving for the best" to get their schools on track. These new principals would also need to learn from the "NUS Spirit" of always striving to become better and not bask in past successes, in order to reach new peaks of excellence.