

**Speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President, National University of Singapore
Commencement Dinner, 16 July 2010 at 7 pm
University Cultural Centre**

Reflecting on the NUS Spirit

Minister for Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen and Mrs Ng
NUS Pro-Chancellors, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow and Mrs Ngiam, Dr Cheong Siew Keong
Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Wong Ngit Liong and Mrs Wong
Members of the NUS Board of Trustees
Graduands, Alumni and Friends
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening.

Commencement, like good wine, can be enjoyed at many levels.

There is the powerful bouquet of youthful exuberance.

The heady mix of joy, pride, and shared experience.

A sense of anticipation of the future, tinged with the sadness of parting.



I particularly enjoy the odd little moments that add a sparkle to Commencement.

At a ceremony this year, I was wondering why one of the graduates was grinning widely as he came up to receive his scroll. After we shook hands, he whipped out his camera and took a shot of both of us. I don't know if the photo came out well but the crowd certainly roared with laughter – another small bright addition to the flavour of Commencement.



This little episode led me to reflect on the NUS SPIRIT.

I am not referring to a new version of the NUS Centennial wine, but to the soul, the animating or vital principle, the fundamental quality and attitude of our University and our community.

What is the NUS Spirit?

What would you say defines it?

How does it manifest itself.

Let me talk about its manifestations as I perceive them through things that I observed on campus.

Last month, we hosted the ASEAN Youth Cultural Forum. At the opening session, each participating university put up a performance to reflect its cultural traditions and directions. We saw stirring performances blending modern and classical dance and music from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and other ASEAN countries. University of Indonesia, for example, did a remarkable “piring” dance, where plates were elegantly smashed with the feet, in time to music.



NUS was among one of the last groups to perform and I wondered what our students would put up.

Would they play Western classical music?

Would they present an East-West fusion piece?

Would they sing a modern version of *Burong Kakak Tua*?

As it turned out, the dance piece that our students performed was an exploration of the following questions:

“Is technology an interruption in the evolution of traditional art forms? Or is the dance between tradition and technology gradually evolving towards a synergistic relationship?”

The introduction to the performance explained that the dance would seek to “examine the ongoing process by which art is formed today, when confronted with the entrance of a new kind of technology that requires no player and no instrument, merely the memory of ideas that can be manipulated, sawed, spliced and looped around on the stage of infinite time.”

Well, the piece worked really well. It was sophisticated and thought-provoking. I could sense the NUS staff and students in the audience swell with a collective sense of pride, tinged perhaps with a mild sense of relief.

Our student performers had successfully re-defined the context. They stood out by being different but thoughtfully so, while being true to what they really were.

In May, an article in The Straits Times caught my eye. A group of faculty and alumni from our Business School was going to trek 120 km in the desert, as part of the GOBI Challenge involving 10 Business Schools. I have known the faculty involved as scholars and administrators, and had not perceived this facet of their lives. One of them told me his only training was to wear trekking boots to classes to break them in. My admiration grew when I learnt that they were doing this trek in large part to raise the profile of the NUS Business School.

Later, a faculty shared his blog with me, including the following piece:

‘I prayed quite a bit during the third day of 33km. I understood afresh how, when pushed beyond the extreme, people could just collapse and die while walking. Your heart could not keep pumping at the high rate for a protracted period, so your brain kept urging you to shut down.’

I am glad to report that our team did not shut down. In fact, they completed the trek, enjoyed it and flew our flag high.

I thought it was a great story - Boldness, grit and gumption – just “doing it”!

Good for them, good for the Business School, good for NUS!

In May last year, students from our Mechanical Engineering Department built an Eco-Car. They intended to design a car that could run for 400km per litre but our students actually surpassed this high target. The team competed in the Shell Eco-Marathon Europe competition, and achieved a remarkable 5th place ranking in the Urban Concept car category.



This achievement was even more dramatic because of the circumstances of the race. I received an email then from Professor Lu Wen Fang, the project supervisor, which described the challenges.

Our team had missed two days of official and practice rounds for the competition because of travel restrictions due to Singapore's H1N1 prevention measures. So, the NUS team had less than a day to assemble the car, pass the inspections and take the only official run left. Only one chance but they took it beautifully. They put in an outstanding performance and finished highly placed in the competition.

The team leader, Zhang Weisheng got straight to the heart of it. He said simply: "We were determined to beat any odds".

Prof Lu himself wrote:

The NUS Eco-Car "has indeed surpassed expectations in more ways than one this year. The team has demonstrated the true spirit of NUS – that is, the ability to develop solid solutions against the odds. They had no time to hesitate and worked well together as a team and shined as individuals."

THE TRUE SPIRIT OF NUS!

An unrelenting, fierce determination to EXCEL, despite the odds.

The COURAGE to be intelligently different, while keeping true to what we really are.

The BOLDNESS to break new ground.

The Spirit of NUS is manifesting itself in many diverse ways throughout our University, as it has throughout our illustrious 105-year history.

We see it in our students, faculty and staff; we find it in our alumni.

The alumni reunions and events during Commencement were packed, lively and vibrant.

The NUS Society launched the NUSS Gold Medal awards to recognize new graduates who had done well academically and who were all-rounders displaying strong leadership qualities.

From my careful observations, my diagnosis is that **the Spirit of NUS is thriving and is growing strongly.**

For our graduating class of 2010, I hope you will carry forward the Spirit of NUS as you pursue the paths of your future. It will stand you in good stead, even as you propagate the rich traditions of our history.

For our NUS community, talent and expertise are critical for our future.

But it will be the force of the NUS spirit that will impel us forward, overcoming difficult challenges, succeeding against the odds.

The NUS Spirit burns fiercely - it fills us with passion and great hope that we will together make NUS a leading Global University centred in Asia.

Thank you.