

**Speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President, National University of Singapore
University Awards 2011
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“Excellence and the art of making tea”

Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Wong Ngit Liong
Members of the Board of Trustees
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Colleagues, Alumni and Friends

The art of making tea has a long history.

According to the annals of tea, the first cup of tea came about by accident – it happened when a dead leaf from a wild tea bush fell into water that was being boiled for the legendary Emperor Shen Nong to drink. This event has been dated with extraordinary precision by some writers - 2737 BCE. Whether or not this was indeed how tea drinking started, what is clear is that today, tea is the world’s most widely consumed beverage.

Last year, I had the honour of having tea made and served by Grand Master of the Enshu School, Kobori Sojitsu.



The Enshu School from Kyoto has for the past 20 years taught the art of the tea ceremony to students in NUS. The tea ceremony performed by the Grand Master was dignified and refined, the cups were elegant, and the tea exceptional.

Yet, as I spoke with the Grand Master, the one thing that really struck me had nothing to do with tea.

What really struck me was that even in something so well-established, so refined – perhaps even perfected – like the tea ceremony, there was still a powerful impetus for constant innovation and improvement.

It caused me to think how crucial it is to deeply entrench in NUS the same culture and spirit - to constantly push boundaries, to reach higher, to define new peaks – to be self-surpassing.

I believe that the driving force for this can come from 3 key sources.

The first is a shared vision and collective sense of purpose that would stretch us but if pursued with imagination and energy, would position us well for the future.

The second is what I would term “Constructive Dissatisfaction”. We should be very proud of the great achievements NUS has made. Yet, this pride must be strongly tempered by a sense of dissatisfaction strongly coupled to a powerful urge to act, to shoot for even higher levels of attainment.

The third comes from being alert and responsive to the intense competition in global higher education. It is not just the top universities in the US and Europe that we need to focus on. We must also be alive to the breathtaking advances being forged by universities in China, South Korea and the rest of Asia.

But, even though the competition is stiff, we should thrive on it. And we must be clear WHY and FOR WHAT we are striving.

At the heart of it, we want to be an irresistible talent magnet drawing high-potential students and top faculty from Singapore and the rest of the world.

Beyond a talent magnet, we want to be a key knowledge node, a buzzing “market-place” for cutting-edge ideas and innovations on issues that matter for the world and for Asia.

Beyond a key knowledge node, we want to be a thought-leader, which contributes to setting the pace and trends in selected areas of education, scholarship, and its application.

And beyond being a thought-leader, we want to make a real difference for our students, for Singapore, for society, for the world.

To achieve this, we need to continually step-up our game. Beyond incremental change, we must also forge transformative advances in education, research and service, that will deliver a transformative impact. To find new ways of working together within NUS and with others, to leap-frog ahead.

This unceasing quest for positive and transformative change has to occur at all levels – by individuals in our community, by programmes and Schools, and by our university as an institution.

The good news is that we are well-poised to pursue these goals successfully.

The four Outstanding Educator Award recipients tonight highlight how, as individuals, we can do even more to engage, stimulate and inspire our students in their journey of learning and discovery; to create a deep and enduring impact on their lives.

The NUS University Town is a good example of a programmatic initiative that can be transformational.

University Town will provide residential college learning with courses that challenge students to understand issues more deeply and from multiple perspectives.



For instance, there will be two writing modules which will help students think logically, express their views clearly and defend their ideas. These writing modules will anchor a wider focus on effective communication which will extend throughout the University.

A key feature of University Town is its scale – at least a quarter of our undergraduates will have the opportunity to live and learn in the Residential Colleges, while all our students would be able to enjoy its state-of-the-art facilities.



In RESEARCH, the quality and reputation of our work continues to grow rapidly.

Our focus remains on nurturing and recruiting talented faculty who will break new ground through their individual research.

Our five colleagues recognised through the Outstanding and Young Researcher Awards, show how much can be achieved by highly talented and dedicated individuals. They challenge our faculty to take on even tougher research questions, and to be even more creative as we pursue paths less travelled in our work.

At the same time, collaborative efforts in our research institutes and centres of excellence, allow us to make a larger impact. Our five integrative research clusters,

for example, play a growing role in addressing the complex and multi-faceted challenges facing our world today.

For example, those of us who are old or feeling old, would be happy to know that the NUS Virtual Institute for the Study of Ageing (VISA) has brought together researchers from various disciplines to work on more than 200 research projects related to healthy ageing.



Our focus on research excellence is coupled with a strong commitment to ensure that the knowledge that we create, will contribute to the enrichment of lives, to the advancement of the economy and society, and to illuminating new pathways of progress and transformation for the future.

This is crucial because through the work of the NUS community, through education research and service, we must create distinctive new value for Singapore and beyond.

In the recipients of the Outstanding Service Award, we have two truly exceptional individuals who have served with unmatched distinction and impact.

Professor Shih Choon Fong, as NUS President from 2000 to 2008, led our university on a remarkable path of surpassing itself.



A man of bold imagination, strong vision and great courage, he set NUS off onto the path of global prominence. Under his leadership, NUS made great strides forward to become a well-respected global university. Tonight, the NUS family is absolutely delighted that Choon Fong is here with us, like a returning Atlantic salmon, to be recognised for his outstanding contributions.

We are also delighted to honour Mr Tony Chew.



As Chairman of the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School's governing board, Tony has set new benchmarks in visionary leadership and commitment. His contributions spanned from crafting the "big picture" goals of the School to attending to many key details, all this despite his own very busy work schedule. His leadership has helped the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School gain a strong reputation for excellence and innovation in the short time since it was started. It is easy to forget how complex and challenging it was to set up a new medical school, as a fresh partnership with a pioneering curriculum. The fact that the School has not just taken off but has really excelled, is the finest testament to Tony's leadership and contributions.

While performing the tea ceremony for me, Grand Master Kobori Sojitsu told me that he had completely re-designed his tea-making table because he was not quite satisfied with the previous one. He had also created new forms for his cups and made further refinements to his style. Nevertheless, he was still thinking hard about how to further improve.



Grand Master Kobori Sojitsu

This evening, as we celebrate our award recipients, we are deeply impressed by their outstanding achievements and resolute commitment to excellence.



From left to right: Prof Yu Haifeng, Prof Gong Jiangbin, Prof Jagadese J. Vittal, Prof Koh Khee Meng, Prof Shih Choon Fong, Mr Tony Chew, Mr Cheah Kok Ming, Assoc Prof Joel Lee Tye Beng, Assoc Prof Chng Wee Joo, Dr Liu Xiaogang.

Most importantly, they are challenging us through their example, to constantly push to excel beyond ourselves and others.

They shine because of their individual talent and determination. But they also remind us how vital it is to have an environment and culture that fiercely values excellence, that always strives to be self-surpassing.

By working together to make NUS such a transformative place where our people always reach beyond ourselves, we can create real impact and value.

And through this collective impulse, to make NUS a leading global university centred in Asia.

Congratulations once again to all our Award recipients!

Thank you.