

**SPEECH BY MR CHUA THIAN POH  
2019 HONORARY DOCTOR OF LETTERS RECIPIENT**

**NUS COMMENCEMENT 2019, MAIN CEREMONY  
THURSDAY, 11 JULY 2019 NUS UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE**

Your Excellency, Madam Halimah Yacob, President of the Republic of Singapore and  
Chancellor of NUS  
Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Education  
Pro-Chancellors of NUS  
Chairman and Members of the NUS Board of Trustees  
Professor Tan Eng Chye, President of NUS  
Graduates  
Ladies & Gentlemen

Good morning!

It is my great honour to be standing here today to receive the Honorary Doctor of Letters. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the University for conferring this honour on me. I am very privileged to join the alumni family of this flagship university of Singapore.

I am also very happy that as a property developer, I am joined by promising architects in today's Main Commencement Ceremony. Who knows, our paths may cross again in the future and Ho Bee's next project may be designed by anyone of you here today!

Congratulations to all fellow graduates!

2019 marks a special milestone as we commemorate the Singapore Bicentennial and reflect on our nation's journey. Singapore has come a long way to become what it is today. Throughout the journey, the nation faced its fair share of hardship and challenges. As fresh graduates, you can expect hardship and challenges to confront you as you move into your next phase of your life. While the world has changed drastically from the time I started work, I believe there are some basic qualities that you must have, even in today's context, for you to succeed in life.

### Learning from Failures

As Professor Tan revealed earlier, I set up my own manufacturing business 55 years ago when I left school at the age of 16. While I did not continue my formal education, I enriched my personal development by pursuing valuable life lessons.

During my darkest days when my business failed, I was fortunate to have the encouragement from my late mother. She advised me to "Start all over again, but learn from your failures."

I took my mother's advice, and persevered. I started a trading business during the 1970s when I was still in my mid-20s. I took the road less travelled and ventured into Indonesia. Back then, there were not many people who were ready to leave their comfort zone and venture into unchartered waters.

As expected, venturing overseas was never going to be smooth sailing. While in Indonesia, I had to deal with three rounds of currency devaluation, but after each round, I picked up valuable lessons. In fact, at the second round of rupiah devaluation, I had hedged my position well and managed to escape from the crisis. It is also very important to understand the country's language and culture.

I was in my late-30s when I decided to return to Singapore. I had decided to make a comeback from the very spot where I fell – which was real estate development. I then founded Ho Bee Land and started developing industrial, residential and commercial properties.

In the mid-1990s, when developers were eyeing expansion in the region, I took a bold decision and went across the globe to expand my business in London. This move proved to be pivotal as Ho Bee managed to leapfrog the Asian Financial Crisis that plagued the region. This allowed my business to remain profitable and we were successfully listed on the Singapore Exchange in 1999.

In 2003, we seized the opportunity to become the pioneer developer in Sentosa Cove, which was an untested residential market back then. Further, the Singapore economy was just recovering from the effects of the SARS episode. However, I was quietly confident of Sentosa Cove as overseas waterfront homes command a huge price premium. After our success in Sentosa Cove, our brand equity was elevated internationally.

### Words of Advice

Even in this era of globalisation and digitalisation, my message to our young graduates is to embrace hardship and persevere. Be prepared to step out of your comfort zone and expand your horizon.

I am a firm believer that the good education you received will help open doors to many opportunities. You must be ready to take on the challenges and seize them when they present themselves.

Life will never be plain sailing. Do not be disheartened by any setbacks. Instead, learn from your mistakes and with determination and guts, you will find the light at the end of the tunnel.

### Values of Giving Back

To me, being successful financially in life is not everything. As a businessman, I consider giving back to community as one of my main responsibilities.

My role models in life are my late parents who emphasised and demonstrated the importance of giving back.

In my late 30s, my father encouraged me to participate in the activities of my clan association. Subsequently, I got involved in more organisations. For the past three decades, I volunteered my time and energy in social and community works. Looking back, the years dedicated to community service had certainly been most valuable.

I also remembered how my mother would always lend a helping hand even when times were tough. She encouraged me to always be humble and show empathy towards others.

With our community and young generation in mind, the NUS Chua Tian Poh Community Leadership Programme (CTPCLP) was set up in 2011. The CTPCLP aims to nurture the next generation of leaders who will serve the community with both vision and passion. In 2017, the Programme expanded and the Chua Tian Poh Community Leadership Centre (CTPCLC) was launched to allow for a bigger intake.

When the Programme was announced, I was surprised to receive an appreciation letter from our founding Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew. He was happy to see this ground-up initiative to develop our future community leaders.

As Prof Kang mentioned earlier, approximately 400 students have been inducted into the CTPCLC and they have since worked with more than 100 organisations to date. I am very pleased to see 56 graduates among the cohort this year who are also from the CTPCLC. I hope all our fellow graduates today will also continue to make significant impact through your service to NUS and the community at large. This is important if we want to transform Singapore into a more inclusive society.

Over the years, I have gained much personal satisfaction and led a more fulfilling life by giving back to our society. It is important to remain humble and show empathy towards others.

### Conclusion

This year, Ho Bee Land is celebrating her 20th anniversary of listing. Coincidentally, today is also my 71st birthday. I could not have imagined a better birthday gift than the conferment of this Honorary Doctor of Letters on me. I wish to thank NUS once again for this honour.

Thank you, and I wish our fellow graduates a very bright future!