

Putting his heart and sole into book

Olivia Ho
Arts Correspondent

Doing business is all about finding the right fit, as author and historian Kevin Y.L. Tan showed in his latest book, *Sole Purpose*, about Austrian shoemaker and entrepreneur Helmut Widdek.

Dr Tan, 58, was speaking to Straits Times Press general manager Tan Ooi Boon at the Straits Times Book Club on Wednesday.

Fifty-five people gathered at the National Library headquarters to

hear him talk about how he traced the journey of Mr Widdek from an upstart shoe salesman to a trailblazing manufacturer in Asia during the economic boom and turbulent politics of the 1970s and 1980s.

“We have forgotten this Asia,” said Dr Tan, an adjunct professor at the National University of Singapore Faculty of Law.

“I thought it was really fascinating how this set of stories could help us learn about what it was like to do business in Asia during that period of phenomenal growth and special economic zones.”

Mr Widdek, now 77, retired from his job as owner and chairman of Hong Kong-based high-end leather goods manufacturer Emper Industrial and moved to Singapore with his wife Sonja.

Dr Tan was introduced to them by one of his students and decided to write Mr Widdek’s story, which he did after nearly 100 hours of interviews over six to seven months.

He also travelled to places such as Vienna, where Mr Widdek grew up, and interviewed people such as Mr Widdek’s friends, former employees and even business rivals.



Author and historian Kevin Y.L. Tan (far left) discussing his latest book, *Sole Purpose*, with Straits Times Press general manager Tan Ooi Boon (left) at a Straits Times Book Club session.
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A rebellious school dropout, Mr Widdek took to shoemaking as a teenage apprentice, but lacked the experience to get into an institute where he could study the craft.

Instead, he became a shoe salesman and rose through the ranks through his enterprising methods. At one point, he was earning commission worth three times the salary of his company’s top directors.

As early as 1973, he ventured into

Asia, setting up factories in the Philippines, Chennai and Shenzhen. Along the way, he dealt with bureaucracy and corruption and even tangled with the family of former First Lady of the Philippines Imelda Marcos, a notorious shoe lover.

“He never thought his story was worth telling. He kept saying, ‘Who’s interested in this?’” recalls Dr Tan, whose other historical

books include Lee’s *Lieutenants: Singapore’s Old Guard* (1999, reissued 2018), which he co-edited with East Asian Institute senior research fellow Lam Peng Er, and *Of Whales And Dinosaurs: The Story Of Singapore’s Natural History Museum* (2015).

“I don’t write to be endorsed by public figures, I write because the story is worth telling. I love telling stories, but in order to have stories to tell, you must first love hearing them.”

At the next Straits Times Book Club session on Nov 27, author Lorna Tan will discuss *Money Smart: Own Your Financial Destiny*, the follow-up to her best-selling book *Retire Smart* (2018), with Money FM 89.3 morning show host Ryan Huang. Readers can register for the talk at str.sg/J3mP.

oliviaho@sph.com.sg

• *Sole Purpose* (\$32.10) is available at major bookstores.