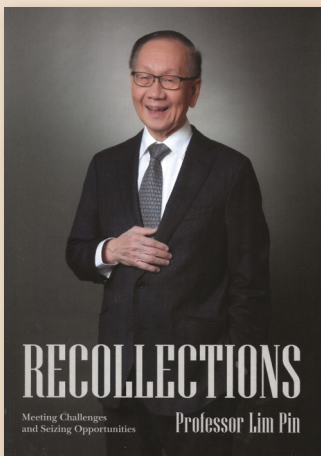


Recollections OF A LIFE OF Accomplishment

Review by Dr Kenneth Lyen | Photo by Ministry of Social and Family Development



Title: *Recollections: Meeting Challenges and Seizing Opportunities*

Authors: Prof Lim Pin and Pearlin Siow

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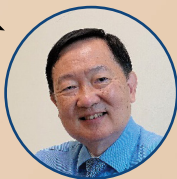
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Dr Lyen is a paediatrician who has written several books and is the founder of the Rainbow Centre for intellectually challenged and autism spectrum disorder children.



Recollections: Meeting Challenges and Seizing Opportunities is a fascinating autobiography of one of Singapore's most important academics, Prof Lim Pin, who transformed the National University of Singapore (NUS) by bringing it into international prominence. According to the Quacquarelli Symonds higher education network, NUS is ranked among the top eleven universities in the world, and this can be largely due to the policies introduced by Prof Lim. This book also charts his many other activities outside the university.

The man behind the book

I found this autobiography a riveting read because Prof Lim was in England at around the same time that I was there. Although our ages are over a decade apart, his experiences in Cambridge University mirrored mine in Oxford. The dinners were formal, we had to wear academic gowns and much of the teaching was in small tutorial classes.

His early life was radically different from mine, as he lived through World War II. I am intrigued by his generation who experienced this turbulent period, and how many of them were driven to overachieve throughout their life. Prof Lim was no exception. Academically he was always the top of his class, and he won the prestigious Queen's Scholarship to study medicine at Cambridge University. He was

there from 1957 to 1963 and became president of the Cambridge University Malayan Association, which included both Malayan and Singaporean student members. There, he met his wife: "It was while in England that I met the girl I would marry. Shirley Loo was a lawyer in training in London, and we grew closer together as time went by."

He returned to Singapore and joined the NUS Department of Medicine as a lecturer in 1966. His rise in the university ranks was considered meteoric. He was appointed associate professor in 1974, promoted to full professor and head of medicine in 1978, followed by becoming deputy vice-chancellor in 1979. Then he was offered the highest position of vice-chancellor in 1981: "At first I was reluctant to take on the job as I was enjoying my teaching and research, but Dr Tony Tan (Minister of Education), and then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew were certainly very persuasive."

Turning visions into reality

He held the vice-chancellor position for 19 years until 2000. During this time, Prof Lim made research one of his priorities, and to promote research, he needed to generate financial support. This he achieved by persuading the Singapore Government to invest large amounts of money into new projects and to recruit researchers from overseas. He visited me in Philadelphia, US and I was one of his

recruits that he brought back home to Singapore.

By 2000, the research and development budget had risen to a multi-million dollar figure, and it has continued to grow into the multi-billion-dollar colossus of today. He linked NUS with big corporations including Telecoms Singapore, IBM and GlaxoSmithKline. He was instrumental in laying the foundations for several research bodies, including the Institute of Systems Science, NUS; the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology; and the National Science and Technology Board (later renamed A*STAR). He was also instrumental in introducing the Internet into NUS, which quickly expanded to the rest of Singapore: "This facility has practically put NUS and Singapore on the world map."

The second area that Prof Lim championed was education: "I had been convinced that university education should train students to learn independently and adapt to change for the rest of their working life." Hitherto most of the teaching was done by delivering a lecture to a large group. I suspect it was due to his experience in Cambridge University, where tutorial classes were very small, that he sought to reduce class sizes in Singapore. He implemented the small-group lecture-tutorial system. He thought that "students wouldn't just regurgitate book knowledge, but actively explore problems, find solutions and think creatively."

The American modular system of breaking up large disciplines into smaller units was introduced to Singapore in a modified, less fragmentary form. Prof Lim felt that "we needed to build all-round thinkers and expose them to various methodologies of problem-solving in different disciplines." This was achieved by having semester-long modules comprising central core subjects and unrestricted smaller elective modules. He also fostered open-ended project-based work, field studies and business entrepreneurship.

Students and staff were sent overseas for electives and sabbaticals, and overseas academics were invited to Singapore to interact with the university. He also strongly believed in nurturing life-long learning. Graduates of NUS were encouraged to keep in touch by returning to the NUS Society Guild Houses for meals and meetings, and they receive a free quarterly magazine, *The AlumNUS*.

The third major area that Prof Lim improved was administration. To this end, he established the Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning, which trains deans and heads of department in basic management. This important area has often been ignored by academicians, and yet the health of a department can be fortified by good management. He set a good example by caring for all the university staff: "I let people of different levels write directly to me, and never turned them away."

Further contributions

Beyond the university, Prof Lim was a strong advocate for the arts and culture. He helped establish the Centre for the Arts where music, dance, theatre, creative arts and literature could flourish. He also brought the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum to NUS, which is a very popular attraction promoting public interest in biodiversity and environmental issues.

I have had some pleasant encounters with his philanthropic work. He was chairman of the board of directors at the Special Needs Trust Company, which

donated generously to special schools, and supported programmes for the intellectually challenged, an area that I am also helping in.

Prof Lim devotes a chapter of his book to his late wife Shirley, a lawyer with the Development Bank of Singapore. She had been a pillar of support throughout Prof Lim's journey: "In a way this book is my ode to her and our lives together." They have three children, all doctors.

Recollections is a record not only of Prof Lim's personal life, but also a historical account of an important chapter of Singapore's development in the past few decades. Perhaps what's missing in this autobiography are the difficulties and disappointments he had to face. It focuses on the positive aspects of Prof Lim's journey, his ability to meet challenges, seize opportunities and achieve success. Thanks to him, Singapore is now highly regarded internationally for its achievements in research and education. This book is packed with information, but it remains highly readable. I unreservedly recommend it. ♦

Legend

1. Prof Lim receiving the Outstanding Volunteer Award from Speaker Tan Chuan-Jin on 16 October 2015

Further readings

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3. Chua A. Lim Pin. Infopedia. Available at: <https://bit.ly/35rJ6WI>
4. Reubi D. The Will to Modernize: A Genealogy of Biomedical Research Ethics in Singapore. Int Political Sociol 2010; 4(2): 142-58.

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