

Speech By MS Siti Hazriah On Behalf Of The 2022 Recipients

A very good evening to our guest of honour, Dr Chua Thian Poh, distinguished members of the Tan Kah Kee Foundation postgraduate scholarship committee, including Chairman, Professor Eugene Tan, my fellow scholars, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for allowing me the honour of delivering this speech on behalf of the recipients of the scholarships awarded today. My name is Hazirah, and I will be embarking on my studies for a PhD in Public Health Science, specializing in Social and Behavioural Health Sciences at the University of Toronto. Phew, that was quite a mouthful. Even I am getting used to stating all of that in one go! If you had told me four years ago, when I decided to embark on my career change, or even 11 years ago, when I first got my undergraduate degree, that this was where I was going to end up, I would have exclaimed, "Not in a million years!". However, as many of you here who are on the cusp of embarking on your own studies would be able to attest, life has a strange and sometimes circuitous way of bringing you where you might not expect to end up.

On the face of it, graduate school can seem like both a solitary and even selfish endeavour – you spend either two (for those doing your Master's) or four to six years (for those signing up for the extra painful upgrade of a PhD) writing about, stressing about and in my case crawling to the finish line during my own master's at NUS. What got me through despite the buckets of tears and feelings of "I don't think I have any more left in me?". It was the sheer force, determination and will of not only myself but my mentors, who were determined to see me through even when I couldn't envision the elusive finish line. Along this vein, I cannot stress enough the importance of those who came before us, our pioneers so to speak, for they have paved the way and blazed a trail for us to follow. This is why I deeply appreciate the tour of the memorial hall that we embarked on just now, as it allowed me to reflect on the important role of those who came before us and the contributions that Tan Kah Kee and his compatriots have made towards education.

Speaking of pioneers, if you have not guessed by now, either through my name or my attire [gesture to attire], I am a member of the Malay community, and in Malay, we have a saying: di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung. Translated to English, it is, wherever your feet are standing on, is where the sky should be upheld, meaning that you should adapt to and respect the traditions of wherever you are in the world. Through his actions in contributing to the educational efforts in Malaya, and his subsequent penning of his memoir while in hiding in Java, I see the ease with which Tan Kah Kee negotiated different worlds, while always staying connected to his roots.

To that end, I feel the need to mention that with the exception of one or two names, I was amazed to discover that I knew every single Malay person and what they were studying or had studied on the list of the past recipients of the Tan Kah Kee Postgraduate Scholarship. I don't know what this says about either my social circle, or the reality of how many of our minority students make it to university in the first place, much less graduate school. As such, I would like to thank both the Foundation and the scholarship interview panel for one of the most engaging and honest interviews I've had on the topic of cultural competence, minority engagement and what it truly means to be Singaporeans who come from our respective cultural identities yet are able to engage with each other.

Now that I have started my training as an academic in public health and began publishing, I see my peers' eyes glaze over when I start launching passionately into my topic of study. I have also started to become immune to numerous requests for a copy of my articles, only to be followed up with broken promises to read them. Yes, becoming an academic is a very good check for the ego, lest you start thinking that you are very smart.

So why study then? In economics, going back to school can be described as an opportunity cost which also requires a tremendous amount of sacrifice –and I would especially like to thank the Foundation for softening the blow of this opportunity cost. Many of us had to make sacrifices especially during this pandemic – to that end, I hope that what I am studying can play a small part in increasing access to equitable healthcare for various members of society, especially those who are furthest away from being able to achieve meaningful health outcomes that empower them. I am sure that many of you here today share the same ambition to make a difference in one way or another through our own respective areas of study.

Allow me to end with this anecdote: years ago, I had chosen to attend Bukit Panjang Government High School as it was the first school to offer the Elective Programme in Malay for Secondary School, or EMAS. Little did I know about my school's storied history as the first integrated government high school in Singapore. Yes, the Singaporean-ness of choosing a school to further my interest in the Malay language, which happens to be the first merged English medium and Chinese medium school is not lost on me. As part of our school's legacy, we sing two school songs every week during assembly– one in English and one in Mandarin. No, don't worry, I will not be subjecting you to my terrible singing voice, but this line in my school song has always struck me (and please excuse my pronunciation): mai tou ku gan bu pa jian xin. My Mandarin speaking friend has broken down the line for me to:

Mai tou: bury your head
Ku gan: do tough work
Bu pa: don't be afraid
Jian xin: hardship

Bury your head, do tough work, don't be afraid of hardship. If that doesn't sum up graduate school in a nutshell, I don't know what else does! In closing, whether you will be freezing in your respective chosen countries, or the central libraries of our local universities (which I had the privilege of doing for six and a half years of my life) I wish you luck and fortitude wherever our destinations take us. Thank you and all the best.