



**REMARKS BY PROFESSOR TAN CHORH CHUAN  
5 JANUARY 2018, 1.40 PM  
SHANGRI-LA HOTEL, SINGAPORE, TOWER BALLROOM**

Madam Halimah Yacob, NUS Chancellor and President of the Republic of Singapore  
Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam  
Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong  
Minister for Finance, Mr Heng Swee Keat  
Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills), Mr Ong Ye Kung  
NUS Pro-Chancellors  
NUS Chairman Mr Hsieh Fu Hua, and NUS Trustees  
Colleagues, Alumni, Distinguished Guests and Friends

1. I really want to express my heartfelt thanks for your presence, for your very warm and kind words and for your thoughtful gifts. Thank you, also, President Halimah, DPM Tharman similarly, ESM Goh, Minister Heng and Minister Ong – your taking the time to grace this occasion to contribute to the video is very much appreciated by me and I think it also reflects the very strong support you have consistently given NUS throughout the years.
  
2. I want to add my heartiest congratulations to Professor Tan Eng Chye on his appointment as NUS President. I am truly delighted that our University will be led by such an outstanding person, an academic leader with the deep passion, vision, values, commitment, and proven ability to innovate and to implement; a remarkable individual who would bring NUS to completely new levels of distinction and contribution.
  
3. When I started as NUS President in 2008, the Board gave me a set of painting brushes. It came in a box marked with the points of the compass. I never asked the reason why but I suspect it was in response to my State of the University Address that year.

4. I had begun that Address by observing that for amateur Chinese landscape painters, one of the most dangerous situations is when the painting you are working on, finally starts to look really good.

5. This is because there is a great temptation to play it safe at that stage, to make timid, incremental strokes for fear of spoiling the picture. Paradoxically, you end up with a piece of art which is commonplace, which falls far short of what it could have become.

6. The big test, therefore, is to proceed boldly and with imagination, to place each new stroke powerfully and strategically, even changing the parts that already look pleasing, in order to transform a very good painting into a truly outstanding one.

7. I ended that speech by inviting each member of the NUS community to take up their brush and add to our collective effort to create a lively but harmonious piece of art – one which breaks new ground while continuing to enhance the best parts of our University.

8. Today, nearly a decade later, I believe we can look back with a well-earned sense of collective accomplishment. We had inherited a really good painting created under the visionary leadership of Professor Lim Pin and Professor Shih Choon Fong, and together, we have further transformed our University and greatly increased its standing, impact and contribution in Singapore and globally.

9. I am especially proud that we have built an environment that enables members of our community to flourish and to do world-class work at the highest international levels.

10. It is always very pleasing to meet our students on campus, in the community or overseas. In fact, the last group of NUS students I met was in a restaurant in Harbin eating noodles. It is always so wonderful to meet them, to hear about the exciting things they are doing and the creative new ideas they are pursuing. You can almost imagine in your mind's eye, the horizons of the possible being widely extended for them.

11. In the same way, we have grown an academic culture that motivates our faculty to excel, differentiate and achieve real impact.

12. As a result, NUS is today, a strong institution on the move – widely respected for being innovative and dynamic. I am really happy we have used our broad-based strengths to contribute to the growth of Singapore, to open new opportunities, and to address the major challenges of society.

In particular, we have intensified the translation of our research and driven entrepreneurship at an even faster pace.

13. NUS is a unique and wonderful institution. I feel deeply privileged to have had the opportunity to helm it. But I should stress, and we all know, that the university is the work of many hands. One of the most frequent questions I am asked is about how I manage to have a good work-life balance. Here is the secret.

14. First, have a wonderful spouse like Evelyn. A wonderful spouse who is terrific in so many ways, and completely unyielding when it comes to planning our breaks.

15. Second, have fantastic colleagues like Tan Eng Chye, Ho Teck Hua, Lily Chan, Yong Kwet Yew, Barry Halliwell, Joe Mullinix, Don Yeo and others; who are so capable, committed and hardworking that I am reliably told that the university makes greatest progress during the periods I am away.

16. I would like to thank them, our Deans, administrative heads, research directors, and many other colleagues for their dedication and many contributions. I am also immensely grateful to our alumni, NUSS and alumni chapters for their unstinting support. My deep appreciation too to our many benefactors for partnering us to make such a difference in so many sectors. Last but not least, I wish to thank Mr Hsieh Fu Hua and Mr Wong Ngit Liong for their wise counsel and support, and the NUS Board which has been so strategic and effective in guiding me personally, and in charting the directions of the University in a fast-changing landscape.

17. That landscape will become even more complex in the future. As some of you may know, Evelyn and I just came back from a long train journey from Moscow to Harbin. I would like to share an anecdote, in part to illustrate that even while on vacation, I am actually thinking about work all the time. We had wanted to travel on the trans-Siberian railway for many years, we were attracted by our mental image of Siberia as being very remote, highly inaccessible and “exotic”. What we found on this trip, was a network of well-connected and modern towns and cities, at least three of which had more than a million people.

18. We had also prepared very well for the cold weather, but we had not realised that Russian trains are extremely well heated, a bit like how we cool Singapore’s rooms down. In fact, our train coach was kept at 30 degrees Centigrade and we had not packed any shorts and tee-shirts. So ironically, we couldn’t sleep well in Siberia in winter because of the heat.

19. The key point though, is that we plan on the basis of certain mental models and assumptions. But we need to constantly check these against fast-moving realities, and to decide if and how, we must change our strategies and approaches. We also need to pay constant attention to agility, to our ability to change course quickly should our assumptions prove wrong. In this regard, I am really glad that with President Tan Eng Chye, Senior Deputy President and Provost Ho Teck Hua and the renewed leadership team, NUS has leaders in place who have the deep global connections and proven skills to do this well.

20. Finally, those of you who have had to sit through many of my speeches over the years, you would know that I like symmetrical endings. As I step down as President, I have done a painting which I would like to present to the NUS Board today.

21. At the very least, it would show that I have put the brushes you gave me 10 years ago, to some use. More importantly, I hope I have been able to partially meet your expectations when you presented me with the set of paint brushes, and your expectations in leading the collective painting of the piece of art which we know as NUS today.

22. I did this painting after Fan Kuan, the towering Northern Song master whom I admire greatly. In fact, I did four versions of this painting, and I would like to also present one of them to Eng Chye this afternoon.

23. Eng Chye, you should not feel any pressure at all to take up Chinese landscape painting. Instead, you should take this as a symbolic representation of the passing of the torch between the outgoing and the incoming President.

24. While the painting appears finished, I would point to the Yuan dynasty master, Huang Gungwang, who is said to have taken 17 years to complete his most famous masterpiece.

25. I have really enjoyed and benefited from working very closely with Eng Chye over the past decade. He is a wonderful person and a most remarkable leader. Under his hands, I am confident NUS will be further transformed, become even more vibrant and be an even more outstanding work of art, highly valued by all at home and around the world.

26. I really appreciate your very kind words, and your gifts and gestures, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you.