

Making Sense
of
Life @/& SMU:
A Partial Guide for the Clueless

Edited by
Pang Eng Fong

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Keeping Track : Four Years in SMU

Phua Kuan Hua

Year One in SMU – Lost trying to find my purpose in university

On my first day at school, I could not find my class. Funny how this has always happened to me, ever since I was in primary school. That day, I left home late, had trouble getting a taxi, and was stalled enroute by an accident on the CTE. To complicate matters, the class had been relocated, and all the friends I had made at orientation did not pick up my call, as they did not dare use their phones in their first seminar-styled lesson. I was more than 45minutes late to a one-and-a-half-hour long lesson, so I tried to answer as many questions as I could in class, to make up for my tardiness. I learnt two things that day that would serve me well throughout my SMU life: 1) to only take the MRT to school and factor in extra time for the journey to avoid the embarrassment of being late; and 2) that class participation was not scary at all. Perhaps that day was a blessing in disguise.

With less than 15 hours of lessons a week, I was also lost in time. I signed up for 14 CCAs during 'Vivace', the CCA Fair. I auditioned for the SMU String Ensemble, Obligato. At that time, they had two violists; one was on exchange and the other was a third-year law student. The music they played did not impress me. I attended one or two floorball training sessions, but felt that it was too exhausting an activity to commit to. I ended up without belonging to any "real" CCAs, although I remain a member on their mailing lists – thereby enjoying welfare giveaways from them from time to time – not a bad deal for a \$2 to \$5 sign-up fee.

More importantly, with so much free time, I hung out a lot with my group mates. In fact, the group mates I still keep in touch with till today are from my groups in Year One. For instance, Zheng Yi (also known as Marjorie or Marge) was my group mate in Business Law in Year One, Term 1; we have remained close friends and taken a few other modules together since. Perhaps it was because I was younger and less wary of people that I managed to make more friends in Year One. Perhaps it was because I was less competitive then, and did not choose my group mates for what they could contribute to the group. Perhaps when we were in Year One we had more time to hang out with friends after classes or meetings. Regardless, I am glad I found these friends in Year One.

In Year One, I was also trying to find my way through my academic journey in university. I had my hopes set on a double degree programme in Law and worked hard for it. The requirements were simple, at least an A- in Business

Law and a GPA of 3.8 by the end of Year One. Without any seniors advising me, I simply went with the flow, doing what I thought students would normally do, while aiming to achieve a GPA of 3.8. I heard from my friends that B+ was average and A+ was really rare, with only about five to ten percent of the class getting the top grade. At the end of my first semester, I achieved a GPA of 3.97 with one A+ to boot. I thought to myself that if I could achieve a near 4.00 without putting in too much effort, then a little effort would bring me over the top. And so my quest for a better GPA began.

Of course, as we have learnt in class, human beings are never satisfied. As soon as one need is met, another is created, and the gratification from achieving a goal is soon replaced by an urge to meet a higher goal. That was exactly what happened to me and my GPA goal. Initially, I merely wanted a 3.8 so I could do a double degree in Law. As I achieved that, I aimed for a 4.0, then a 4.3. I finally achieved 4.3 in the second semester of Year Two. After two years of hard work, I remember the sheer ecstasy of opening my email and seeing 4A+ that semester. The immense satisfaction I felt was something I would not soon forget. However, the constant pressure to deliver after that took a toll on me, and the effects would be felt two years later, in Year Four.

During the initial weeks of my first winter break, with nothing scheduled, I was enjoying my holidays as if I were a secondary student enjoying his December break. I soon realised, however, that this could not continue, especially not for a 17-week summer vacation. I started looking for events to sign up for during my second semester, and was accepted as the Deputy Secretary and Human Resource Director for SMUSA's Graduation Night for the Graduating Class of 2013. I also auditioned for the post of facilitator for the Accounting Society (ASoc) Camp for freshmen and was subsequently accepted. My second semester was thus filled with meetings for Graduation Night and preparations and rehearsals for ASoc Camp.

Finding meaning in friendships

I signed up as facilitator because I had enjoyed my ASoc camp as a freshman, and wanted to be part of that experience again. I also wanted to induct my juniors and give them advice that I wished I had had when I was a freshman. As a facilitator, I was inducted into the ASoc Mentorship Programme, where

I had to ensure that our freshmen had a smooth transition into university life. I found this experience to be very meaningful; to be able to help my juniors gave me great satisfaction and pride. I was very happy that I could share with them my experiences, and believe that our interactions have benefited them, for I was told that some of them looked up to me as a role model.

As part of the preparations for the camp, I worked closely with my co-facilitators, often pushing beyond our comfort zones. For instance, we were required to undergo dance training sessions to prepare for the Finale Night of the camp. It was through these many nights of bonding that I realised how close we had become. At SOA, this core group of friends form part of my SOA family, a family that I still hold close to my heart.

Concluding reflections for Year One

Ultimately, I realised I was lost in Year One – not just in time or academics, but lost in trying to find my purpose in university. What did I want to achieve in my four years? What did I want my years in university to mean? How should I live my time in SMU in a way that I would feel proud when I looked back years ahead? At the end of it all, how hard should I study, and why?

I may not have found all the answers in Year One, but what I found in Year One, was firstly, friends. Friends that I know I would keep in touch with much longer than friends I made at the primary, secondary, or junior college levels. Maybe not for life, as we will go our separate ways after graduation, but I know I have found at least two people who could be my “brothers” at my wedding. Though I do not know if it will happen 10 years down the road, perhaps I will acknowledge them now. There is Paul, from my ASoc facilitation group, who went through my hardest modules with me; Alvan, my clan head when I was facilitator for my ASoc freshmen, with whom I also went through thick and thin (academically); and Jonathan Teo, my closest friend in SMU (but with a height of close to 2 metres, he may steal the limelight from me at my wedding).

Secondly, I found love, and for the first time in my life, I had an official girlfriend to bring home to meet my parents. She taught me many things about myself, about girls, about friendship, and about life. It was a tough decision, asking her to be my girlfriend. She had just told me that she would be withdrawing from SMU and going to Australia to pursue Medicine, which was her

dream at that time. While I was happy for her, I was afraid of losing her, and thus I asked her to be my girlfriend. We had four months together before she left for Australia. As the Chinese saying goes, 不在乎天长地久, 只在乎曾经拥有, which means it does not matter how long we have been together, what matters is that we once had each other. It was a phrase that significantly influenced my decision. Ultimately, though, the distance took a toll on our relationship.

Thirdly, I found my motivation in studying. My meaning in life is to love the people around me, to care for them, and to be loved and cared for in return. Achieving good results and getting a decent job so I can provide loved ones with good food and things would make me happy, I think. Perhaps having had a girlfriend helped shaped this view. Perhaps it was the experience of love that shaped my meaning in life. Either way, I am glad I found a reason to continue studying and aim to be the best in what I do.

Year Two : Finding meaning in helping people

In Year Two, I found myself taking on roles to help my peers. I was invited to join the ASoc Peer Tutors Scheme. The idea of the Peer-Tutors Scheme is simple – gather a pool of qualified BAcc students who excel academically to help academically weaker students. Key responsibilities included providing ad-hoc assistance to students through email and face-to-face consultations, as well as imparting study techniques, facilitating knowledge exchange among students and conducting exam or mid-term revision workshops. My term as a peer tutor would be renewed every semester until I graduated.

I was also invited to be a Teaching Assistant (TA) for my accounting modules, which I had never dreamt of applying for. It came as a complete shock when Prof Andrew emailed me to congratulate me on my performance and asked if I was interested to be Teaching Assistant for Financial Reporting, (previously known as Corporate Reporting), a module rated by seniors as only second in difficulty to Advanced Financial Accounting. I later found out that while my academic performance was a factor, Prof Andrew chose me because of “how nice” I was in class. I had no idea that professors took note of whether students were participating responsibly or whether they helped students outside of class. I also remembered I once spotted an error in a quiz but waited until we

were alone to tell Prof Andrew about it – a gesture he appreciated. I think small gestures like these were important in garnering a Teaching Assistantship.

I continued to be TA for my accounting professors until my final semester, serving two TA-ships every semester. In writing this essay, I asked two professors whom I had served why they asked me to be their TA. I was curious, because these professors approached me to be a TA before I had sat for the final examination for their courses. I wanted to discover what qualities they saw in me that they thought were more important than doing well in the final exams. I thought this might hold true in the workplace as well – certain qualities are equally if not more important than mere work performance. From our conversations, three characteristics surfaced – humility, empathy for students, and helpfulness. They also thought that I would be a good role model for the students. It was extremely humbling, talking to my professors and learning from them. They were experts in their own fields, yet they possessed great humility.

Humility had not been my strong suit in the past. I remember a time when I was counselled by one of my CCA teachers, Mrs Nancy Tay, in Hwa Chong Institution, in Secondary 3 or 4. She took me aside during orchestra practice and told me that when one is skilled, others would be sure to notice without them having to brag about themselves. “Why is it so important to tell people that you are good?” she asked me. I shrugged, but we both knew that it was because I needed to feed my ego. That short session changed me. A lot. But it was only six years later in SMU that I learnt why I had behaved like this, in my Leadership and Team Building module: the most satisfying reward for people with a high Need for Achievement under McClelland’s Human Motivation Theory is the recognition of their achievements.

It took a lot of conscious effort on my part to stop this, and yet I still feel the urge to open my mouth, wanting to blow my trumpet whenever the opportunity presented itself. Hence, the validation from my professors was very encouraging to me. Ten to twelve years on, when I make partner in a firm, I hope I can still remain humble and close to the ground.

Discharging my duties as a TA and peer-tutor was extremely satisfying. It is gratifying to know that students have benefited from my workshops because I could explain concepts in a more intuitive way.

Overseas community service project to Myanmar

During my December break in Year Two, I embarked on an Overseas Community Service Project (OCSP) to Myanmar, and was also the Finance Head of the expedition, in charge of budgeting, managing the funds, as well as fund-raising. OCSPs were very popular (probably because participating in one would guarantee the fulfilment of the 80 hours of required CSP hours), so many OCSPs had several rounds of interviews to screen participants. I was allotted a place in the OCSP without going for the interviews—the leader of the expedition who was a friend, offered me a place as the Finance Head one semester before the interviews began.

In China, this is known as 关系 (*guān xi*), or connections. Businesses are conducted through people you have connections with, and it is a way of life. In Singapore where three out of four citizens are of Chinese ethnicity, connections still play a big part in getting things done. In fact, I suspect my internships were secured through connections. I do not think it is unethical to get ahead or enjoy success because one has the right connections, but I do think that this should not be viewed as an entitlement or attributed to one's hard work. Rather, one should be conscious and grateful for his roots, as the Chinese saying 饮水思源 (*yǐn shuǐ sī yuán*) goes. In this respect, I have a lot to be thankful for, in particular, the guidance from my teachers in Hwa Chong Institution, which instilled in me this philosophy.

It is important, however, to not have a misplaced sense of loyalty. As the Finance Head, I had direct access to the funds of the expedition, and was responsible and accountable for the finances. On the night we had collected funds from the participants, my friend and I were walking to deposit the cash collected, about \$18,000. He suggested depositing only half and taking the other half to the casino to increase our funds. He made a very convincing argument along the lines of a risk-calculated approach. To be honest, he was very suave, and even guaranteed that if he lost the money he would personally repay it. If we won some cash, it would save time and effort from fund-raising and writing grant proposals. He hinted that I should accede to his request seeing how much he had helped me. I am proud to say that I remained firm and said that it was something I could not agree to my values. Thankfully, I found out later that he was merely testing me. I can only hope that I will not find myself in a similar position in the future. Scenarios like this one were played

out a lot in my ethics class this semester, and the related principles reinforced throughout the semester. Although people may claim that they had no choice when doing something unethical or illegal (like the case of WorldCom) – they have a spouse and children to support, a mortgage to pay, and parents to take care of – my professor reiterated that there is always a choice. Some things are worth quitting over.

During the OCSP, we interacted with children and created an English language learning programme for them that would be used through future batches of the OCSP. Since I first participated in an overseas community project in JC, my mother has always wondered why I had to pay money to help people overseas. Couldn't I just help people in Singapore? To her, I could have just sent money overseas, or provided gainful employment to the locals there who could better help the children on a long-term basis. I could not help but agree. I think OCSPs are programmes developed to give global exposure to Singaporean students on the pretext of helping children in need overseas. Is it not very cruel to form close emotional attachments to these children for three weeks to a month, and then leave them behind, promising to return without intending to do so? I have been told that these children have been the subjects of so many "projects" they have gotten used to the yearly transition of new university students coming into their lives and leaving weeks later. Yes, these people need help. But what they really require is long-term assistance, not short-term interruptions to their daily lives.

For some of my friends, OCSP was a life-changing experience, because they experienced living under harsh conditions for the first time, unable to communicate with loved ones, and without access to the Internet. For me, the trip to Myanmar was particularly impactful. I had a close shave with death when the bus we were travelling in skidded across the highway, crashed into the divider, almost flipped as it went over a big drain before ramming through another divider and stopping in the middle of the highway facing the traffic head-on. That experience changed my perception on the fragility of life. We can be here today, but there is no certainty whether we will still exist tomorrow. It also showed that during such times, I turn to religion for solace. Jolted wide awake at the first huge impact, I started praying non-stop. I think everyone who was awake was either freaking out or praying, including those who had claimed they did not believe in a higher Being. It struck me how important my religion was to me; it was something that could not be compromised.

Business cultural study trip to the Middle East – Is success or failure due to luck or hard work?

Throughout my entire sophomore year, for about eight months, I was Co-Chairman of the Business Cultural Study Trip to the Middle East, organised under the purview of the Office of Global Learning. The objective of the trip, which was in its second year, is to expose students interested in the Middle East to the companies and the culture there. The trip was to last for two weeks, with two to three visits daily to a combination of companies, the High Commission, museums, and mosques in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Istanbul. I was extremely excited about going as I had missed participating in the first run of the trip due to dengue fever.

The entire planning phase was filled with obstacles and roadblocks. It was as if the trip was cursed. First, there was a huge conflict of interest with the Business Study Mission to the Middle East. We were requested to withdraw and stop our trips, and as a result our team had to change our itinerary several times. We managed to get a contact from the Embassy of Oman, but our proposal to go there was later rejected. I was utterly demoralised. Nevertheless, we pressed on, and attempted to change our itinerary to include Iran, across the gulf from UAE, but were later advised against going there. We finally decided to shift the final leg of our trip to Istanbul, Turkey, and we were very happy to work with the Turkish Cultural Centre in Singapore to organise workshops for our participants before our trip. Alas, the death of a Turkish boy who was caught in street battles in Istanbul between police and protestors rekindled unrest across the country. Worse yet, the media censored the news of curfews imposed and we were told by our Turkish counterparts at the Turkish Cultural Centre that it has become too dangerous to go to Turkey, and that we should consider cancelling our final leg.

Finally, one week before we were to take off to the UAE, the Singapore government issued travel alerts cautioning Singaporeans from travelling to the Middle East and Saudi, as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus had started to spread around the region. It was so serious that the government had quarantine chalets on standby and had started distributing N-95 masks to every household. Parents were very worried, and OGL was concerned. Ultimately, the decision fell into my hands as Co-Chairman of the trip, whether

to proceed with or to cancel the trip. My mother had confiscated my passport; my father had told me that as a leader, I would not be able to live with the guilt if anyone on my trip should contract the virus; OGL's message was that they did not want the front page of Straits Times to read "SMU students brings first case of MERS to Singapore".

With few alternatives and an extremely heavy heart, Cheng (my Co-chairman) and I decided to cancel the trip. It was a decision made three days before we were supposed to fly, concluded late at night in the Office of Global Learning with the OGL staff by our side affirming to support whatever decision we made. It was one of the hardest decisions I had ever made. To me, the cancellation of the trip would mean months of hard work gone to waste. Meetings with all the companies we set up had to be cancelled; internships had to be disrupted; refunds had to be arranged and begged for from insurance companies; and I was tasked with the difficult task of informing all our participants that the trip would be cancelled, with no guarantee of any refunds.

Did this mean the trip was a complete failure? Some would say that it was. But the fact that we managed to secure a 100% refund for all participants mitigated the outcome. Half was paid for by the insurance company, and the other half was paid out of OGL's coffers. My good relations with the staff at OGL helped in part to persuade the Director of OGL to refund the students. I was immensely grateful to OGL for this very kind gesture, and sent hampers and flowers to the staff and Director of OGL the very next day out of my own pocket.

More importantly, although the trip did not materialise, the entire eight months of planning built resilience in me. I gave my best and all, fought with faculty, staff, and companies, just so that our study trip participants could enjoy their trip to the Middle East. Ultimately, the way the events unfolded was entirely beyond our control, and I could not help but wonder if I could have been any unluckier. Perhaps I was just not destined to go to the Middle East, or perhaps it was a way of my deities protecting me from some greater danger in the Middle East. I would never know, but my interest in the Middle East since then has greatly waned. The whole experience has also taught me that the organisation of such trips were rife with office and national politics – that sometimes, some things are just not within your control.

Is success or failure in life due to luck or hard work? From my experience in planning this trip, I see that luck, or the lack of it, played a role in the failure of my trip. Had my trip actually taken place and had it been a resounding success,

I wonder if I would attribute its success to luck or hard work. I believe I would have given full credit to the hard work of my team and myself. And this is a very chilling thought, and one that I could easily make in the future. Thus far, I think this is one of my greatest takeaways yet from my reflection.

Year Three – Unique experiences

Right before I started Year Three, I attended the JENESYS 2.0 programme, which took me to Tokyo and Yamanashi, Japan, with other students from various local universities and ITE. I had always wanted to visit Japan, and it was an eye-opening experience for me. The exchange programme involved a sharing session on my volunteering experience, a cultural exchange at Tsuru University, a homestay programme with my Japanese hosts, wheat harvesting at a farm, and experiencing sustainable living at a tree house in the mountains.

Harvesting wheat in the rain allowed me to reflect on one of the values that I have been brought up with: never waste food. There is a Chinese poem titled 农夫 (*nóng fū*), or farmer, which describes how every grain of rice on the plate is the result of a farmer's sweat and back-breaking work. When I was young, my parents used to tell me, every grain of rice left on my plate would be a pimple on my future wife's face. Not wanting an ugly spouse, I assiduously finished every grain of rice on my plate at every meal. It was not until my experience harvesting a whole wheat field for an entire day that I truly understood what it meant when the poem said every grain of rice is gained with hardship.

Through this, I also better appreciated the importance of hard work. The wheat field was not going to harvest itself. Team work and specialisation were also paramount. Some people were very good at tying the harvested wheat together to dry while others preferred holding the sickle in hand and cutting the wheat. More importantly, I finally understood what my parents were trying to inculcate in me: 1) to appreciate the things we have in life because of the hard work of others; and 2) to be prudent and avoid wastage, not just for food, but in life in general.

I also experienced many new things for the first time: arranging flowers, showering with my Japanese's host's kid, getting entirely naked for *onsen* (public hot spring), a homestay in a Japanese home, complete with Tatami mats

and floor dining, walking into a glass cabinet because the glass was so clear and chipping my front tooth because of it, and most excitingly, grass skiing.

I had never heard of grass skiing, only of snow skiing. It was an activity I found remarkably hard when I first tried it, and very satisfying when I could at least move about and make turns. As of now, this activity per se did not change my perception on the meaning of life, but it was certainly something memorable. Perhaps, in the future when I look back, I may be able to connect the dots and reflect on how this activity and other subsequent events shaped my understanding of meaning in life. Perhaps ten years down the road, none of these would make sense. But I think this is something I would like to remember from my SMU days in the future.

Does gender matter in finding meaning?

Japan is a patriarchal society; I became aware of this immediately at my homestay. The husband was the head of the household, and the wife tended to all kitchen duties. I was expressly forbidden from stepping into the kitchen, while my friend Jin Jin was requested to help the wife out. It was very ironic, given that I would have much preferred to help prepare dinner and Jin Jin would have loved to play with the cute little boy instead. Instead, I had to entertain the child using sign language and toys while Jin Jin (who could converse in Japanese) managed to cut herself while helping in the kitchen. As a mother, the wife was also expected to take care of the children. The younger child was barely four months old, and was still breastfeeding. I had a culture shock when the mother started to breastfeed the infant right in front of me, all while serving the husband and the guests. She also had to wash the dishes while the husband drank sake and watched television after dinner.

When it came time to shower, I was allowed to go first because I was the male guest. The mother trusted me with to shower the elder child, who was about five years old. It was quite an experience, because the mother was a fan of *onsen* and they had an *onsen* tub in the bathroom which we used after showering. I enjoyed playing *Pokémon* with the little boy in the *onsen* tub. Jin Jin went after me, followed by the father then the mother. I learnt that in Japanese homes, the elders and males would go first (although the

grandmother may bathe before the father of the house). Since the *onsen* water is not changed after each use, females who bathe later are using water the men had bathed in earlier.

In a patriarchal society, gender matters in finding one's place and meaning in life. The father, for instance, would be thoroughly embarrassed to be seen in the kitchen. The mother is expected to take care of her children, even at the expense of her job, because that is what mothers are "supposed" to do. This might explain why the child-bearing age of Japanese women is becoming increasingly higher. My homestay mother, for instance, had her first child when she was 41, and her second when she was almost 44. She explained that this was because she wanted to establish her career before having children, as she feared she might lose her job otherwise. It did not matter in the end, as she quit her job to do freelance consulting to care for her new-born.

I am glad that patriarchy is not as strong in Singapore. I love cooking while my girlfriend is unable to cook. It would be ridiculous to stop me from cooking and to force her to cook. I am also unable to fathom how my future wife would react if I insisted that I had to bathe first, and she to bathe in the water I had just used. Perhaps, just perhaps, gender does not matter as much in Singapore. As my girlfriend, Kimberly, puts it, "Yes, I want gender equality, but I will not say it because I do not want to serve NS".

Finding meaning in life through exchange

Life during the overseas exchange was the happiest part of my SMU memories. I travelled extensively, cooked whatever I wanted to, skipped classes at will, and had ample time to play. I was carefree; I loved every minute of it. This was the kind of lifestyle I wanted. I did not want to work non-stop at an investment bank. I needed the freedom and free time to at least do what I wanted at night – be it cooking or bonding with my friends over a game of *DOTA* (a multi-player online game that tests teamwork, communication, skill, and leadership, among other things).

I also spent a lot of time with Kimberly, and while we had arguments from time to time, our relationship grew. Staying together in an apartment also gave me insights into what it could be like living with her, and whether she would be a suitable partner for life.

While travelling on exchange, I realised I would like to retire in a quaint town with a slower pace of life. Perhaps I would like to teach in university as my retirement job. My experience of winter in Montreal also made me realise I did not enjoy extreme weather. Perhaps, I should retire in a locale with a cool climate all year round, similar to what I experienced in San Francisco during winter.

My experiences on exchange showed me where my priorities lay. First, my willingness to sacrifice an exchange at Wharton to stay in the same city as Kimberly showed that I placed a higher value on quality time spent with my loved ones above achievement or a brand name. Second, my experience during exchange surfaced again my high need for achievement. This was demonstrated in how I studied to achieve straight As in all the courses I took at McGill, even though all I needed was a pass. Third, exchange showed me that my true idea of relaxation was staying at home, fixing a jigsaw puzzle or playing a game of *DOTA*. I enjoyed these more than travelling and sightseeing, although these were memorable as well. Fourth, I was perfectly comfortable not making new friends, even though I treasure very much the friendships I have forged. Perhaps this is because I am an introvert, and need time to open up to new acquaintances. On reflection, I see that my closest friendships were forged through difficult times, and I bonded best over activities (rather than mere conversations like how Kimberly bonds with her friends). Perhaps exchange was too much of a luxury to enable forging of true friendships.

Exchange also helped me see the values that Kimberly held, and allowed me to better appreciate our differences. At the very least, I feel that our "conception of the good" are similarly grounded in Buddhist or Confucianist values, such as filial piety and prioritising familial relations.

Year Four – Finding meaning in (project) work

In Year Four, one of the courses I had wanted to take badly was closed due to insufficient demand. Disappointed, I wondered whether such a policy should be questioned. After all, a school should not be for-profit (and indeed SMU is not) so I thought that courses should not be closed because the insufficient demand could not justify the cost.

Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise, as I replaced the module with one of the most interesting ones I have taken in SMU, Audit for Public Sector,

which is taught by the previous Auditor General, Professor Lim Soo Ping. It was really insightful as he shared his experiences and life stories. The project for the course was to conduct an audit on the National Kidney Foundation (NKF). I was highly motivated to do this because he mentioned that the top two groups would get to present their audit findings to the senior management of NKF. The potential impact that a project could have in the real world motivated me more than merely achieving grades. I was naturally over the moon when I received an email from Prof Lim, to ask us to present our findings to the senior management of NKF. These are professors who really care enough to try to make a difference; I respect them for their dedication and passion in what they do.

A second example that shows how project work motivates me is in the Business Capstone in my final semester, where I undertook a project to work with a client in Kluang, Malaysia. I thought this would be interesting as I have never worked on a project with a foreign client, nor gone on an overseas trip for a graded module. I also valued the opportunity to explore, and to provide our findings and recommendations to the client based on what is most pragmatic. In conducting our research, we interviewed many retirees, who shared their life experiences. Through this process alone, I learnt more than what we had in classes. We also consulted Prof Pang on several occasions, and his views were very enlightening. In particular, he helped me understand why he insisted on paying for our expenses instead of letting the client foot the bill. Prof explained that he did not want us to feel obligated to the client; but if the client found what we presented to them useful, they could make a donation to the school, and students could even benefit from a scholarship, if they should do so. Immediately, my motivation skyrocketed. I had never once thought my project could lead to sponsoring a student for a year at SMU. This gave true meaning to the project work beyond what I had originally thought possible. I do not know if the client eventually donated any money to the school. It is probably best that I did not know; I fear that if I found out otherwise, my satisfaction may actually diminish. Such is the beauty and power of hope.

Conclusion

In my four years at SMU, I have been presented with many choices. I had to decide on which OCSP I wanted to participate in, which secondary degree to pursue, where I wanted to go for exchange, etc. When presented with choices, I realised that it is hard to be satisfied with the current one as there is always a lingering thought that “the next one would be better”. I have always tried to reconcile my desires with what I think ought to be the recipe to happiness: a Chinese idiom, 知足常乐 (*zhī zú cháng lè*), which posits that happiness comes from being content. But the next question is, how can we be content? How can I be content?

This was something that I synthesised through talking to people throughout my journey at the SMU, including Mr Gerald Ee, President of ISCA, my professors, my interview subjects, and my maternal grandmother. I think firstly, we have to be grateful – I was told that it is impossible to be content if you did not know how to be grateful. Secondly, we have to break the habit of satisfying new needs with acquisitions. There is always more to be had. In other words, if one pursues material wealth, then one can never be content – there is always more to be acquired. Thirdly, as Prof Sum Yee Loong constantly reminds me, “Don’t compare yourself with others. There will always be people earning more than you. If you keep comparing yourself with others, you will never be happy.” Fourthly, help others. This was ingrained in me by Ms Wee Heng Fang, who taught me Chinese in primary school, and who has been one of the greatest teachers who shaped my values. She said: 助人为快乐之本 (*zhù rén wéi kuài lè zhī běn*) – the fundamental secret to happiness is to help others. Mr Ee also shared with me that in life, we are either taking from others, or giving to others. Having benefitted from society, he thought it was time to give back to society in his retirement. Two other phrases feel apropos to what he shared: 取之社会, 用之社会 (*qǔ zhī shè huì, yòng zhī shè huì*) which means that as one benefits from society, one should also give back to society. The second is 为善不欲人知 (*wéi shàn bù yù rén zhī*): When a person wants to do good, it should not be done because he seeks fame, benefits, or reciprocity; if he does so, and needs people to know and praise him, then it is no longer charitable.

Finally, as I reflect on my SMU life, I become more cognizant that many of my values are grounded in Chinese proverbs, which I restate here: 1) 饮水思源 (*yǐn shuǐ sī yuán*) – to remember my roots; 2) 取之社会, 用之社会 (*qǔ zhī shè huì, yòng*

zhi shè huì) – to give back to society; 3) 知足常乐 (*zhī zú cháng lè*) – the secret to happiness is contentment; 4) 助人为快乐之本 – helping others is fundamental to happiness; 5) 为善不欲人知 (*wéi shàn bù yù rén zhī*) – when we help others, we should not need to tell others or expect reciprocity; and most importantly, 6) 百善孝为先 (*bǎi shàn xiào wéi xiān*) – of all good deeds, filial piety ranks first.