

**SMU Commencement for Class of 2024,  
Opening Ceremony  
SMU Hall, 30 July 2024  
Speech by SMU President Prof Lily Kong**

Guest-of-Honour, Mr Sherman Kwek, Group CEO of City Developments Limited;

Chancellor of Singapore Management University, Mr Lim Chee Onn;

Pro-Chancellor, Mr Eddie Teo;

Former Chairman of SMU and Honorary Degree Recipient, Mr Ho Kwon Ping;

Chairman of the SMU Board of Trustees Mr Piyush Gupta, and members of the Board of Trustees;

Faculty, staff, and the Class of 2024;

Parents and guests;

In my lifetime I have attended many, many commencement ceremonies. They used to be called convocation ceremonies. The first that I attended, of course, was my own as a fresh graduate in 1986. And I have to confess that I didn't listen to the speeches very much and I was a little bit self-absorbed. I was delighted that I had been conferred a first-class degree, I was concerned that it was time for me and my family to get back, and I was sitting and reading and thinking about things. The Guest of Honour spoke about the difficult times in which the graduates were getting into the world. But that was what I was told later because I wasn't paying attention.

Today, I have paid rapt attention, because these were absolutely stirring and amazing speeches, and I hope that each and every one of you have paid attention to what was being said. To Sherman Kwek, our Guest of Honour, I thank you deeply for sharing so candidly, and from the depths of your own experience, what resilience means, what failure means, what being beaten up means, and what picking yourself up when you fall means. And I think we could not have had a more stirring and appealing rendition of that personal experience that we've heard today. So, I'd like to invite you to join me in a round of applause once again for our Guest of Honour.

I found myself listening, of course, with rapt attention to my boss, our Chairman. But I also found myself listening with rapt attention to my former boss, our former Chairman Mr Ho Kwon Ping. Aside from the fact that we always sat once a month together to eat donuts and talk about the university, today's speech reminded me about why I wanted to join SMU, first as Provost and then as President. There is a purpose beyond just being the President of the University, being the leader. There is a purpose to what we're doing at an academic institution such as the University and it is to transform and touch the lives of the individuals who sit in front of us today, who have spent about four years with us.

At lunch, when I sat with some of our graduates, I heard about the seven internships that one single student had undertaken. I heard about and it's not about the number, but about the purposefulness in which she went about looking for the internships. She wanted to make a difference in the world, and she wanted to do that in the space of sustainability. And she went for one internship after another in Singapore and overseas. She listened to seniors who advised her to listen to my colleagues in the Career Centre. She listened

to friends, and she picked up on the cues that were given to her, and she took advantage of the opportunity that my colleagues and I work so very hard to deliver to you. And it made our efforts completely worthwhile.

But it is not just in education that we make a difference or seek to make a difference. It is also through that creation of knowledge that he talked about. Universities today have gotten caught up in the game of ranking and by research in which other academics cite our papers, where are we publishing, and all of that has its own importance. But beyond that, it is also about how our research makes a difference to community and society. And it's that societal impact that we want to add as a dimension to what we do in the creation of knowledge.

For those of you who are graduating, I know that some of you are looking to join the research endeavour. I hope you will remember that it is not about careerism. It is about what difference you make through your research to the community. For those of you who don't care to join research, but have been part of that enterprise, so to speak, I hope that you have found that whether it is research through an SMU X module, as one of your friends have articulated on the screen, or it is for your own personal thesis, you have found meaning in undertaking that work that goes beyond the grade. And so, that holistic sense of what a university stands for is the message I took away from Mr Ho Kwon Ping's speech, and I thank you for reminding us.

I have jettisoned the speech that was written for me in the interest of speaking what comes from the heart, but just so that for those people who have actually toiled away at writing the speech, I will draw some themes from it. There are two that pick up on what our Guest of Honour was talking about, and one is resilience. In your lives, you will find many moments of stress. You will find

many, many hours when you're thinking why am I doing this? And you're going to be under that mental stress. They wanted me to remind you and I agree with them, that above everything else, please ensure that you eat healthy. And this is a message that Sherman also shared with you. I could not share it with you with that same depth of feeling that he communicated about what resilience means. But I share with him that conviction that you can only go far if you keep yourself well.

The second message, I think it's coincidental. I didn't look at Sherman's speech before I don't think we took a look at mine. But it is also about social media, and particularly for your generation. So many of you live in social media. My colleagues and I were just marvelling the other day at how you can also send messages without looking at your phones. With your phone in your pocket. You can type out your messages without a single typo. We were marvelling at how you use all these different platforms to showcase yourselves. In the days when we were young, we wrote our diary and hid it away because we didn't want people to read what we wrote. Today in social media, we want people to read what we write, to like what we write. It creates a sense of community in cyberspace, but it can also, as Sherman said, be absolutely devastating. People can be extremely, extremely harsh in social media, and it can have an impact on you. And so that message of resilience, mental well-being on the one hand and on the other, not living only in the world of social media, and being sometimes devastated is so important. Find the time not just to look at your phones as you're walking about. When you sit at the dinner table, don't only be looking at your phone, when you have loved ones around you. Because believe it or not, your loved ones will not always be there for you. So, cherish the time that you have with them and talk to them.

Amongst our audience today are your loved ones, your parents, your friends, hopefully your girlfriends and boyfriends. But spend the time to thank them for what they have done for you and continue to do. So, I want to extend a vote of gratitude on behalf of your families, your friends, for having supported your children and our students over the last several years. I would like to thank you for being friends of the university. Many of you actually support us in very many ways. I sincerely thank you for that and hope that you will remain friends of the university for a long time to come in multiple capacities.

Thank you very much and congratulations once again.