TABLE TALK WITH KAY KUOK

Raising good
global citizens

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INGAPOREAN lawyer and hosteller Kay Kuok credits her late paternal grandmother Tang Kek Joo with being the strongest influence in her life.

Tang Kek Joo, born in 1900 and died at age 95 in 1995, was a devout Buddhist and strict vegetarian who had that rarest of experiences for women of her time — being able to go to school, in her birthplace of Fuzhou, China.

Madam Kuok, 45, who comes from the family that runs the Kuok Group of Companies, a global business empire that spans trading, property, manufacturing and shipping, recites: "I never really appreciated the depth of her understanding of life and her values until I was an adult. She added: "I’ve always tried to live by a lot of the things that I learnt from her and one of her best sayings is, 'As much as you receive, you must give'."

This mother of two sons has two grandsons. She is the executive chairman of Shangri-La Hotel, in which she oversees all its legal work as well as its South-east Asian hotels.

She has since grown much back to society, having helped start the Singapore Tourist Board, National Arts Council and Singapore Environment Council.

She is also a member of the National University of Singapore (NUS) Board of Trustees. From today, she chairs the governing board of the Yale-NUS College, a landmark venture between NUS and Yale University which will open in 2015 as the first Liberal arts college here.

What is the Yale-NUS College about?

It is about the experience of living, learning and linking within a community. We’re making it compulsory for our students to live on campus, with opportunities to live for a short time overseas too, so they learn how to be independent, be in control of their time and how to get on with each other.

Many undergraduates here still live at home, so their experience of university is not too different from their early years in school. These are people who will soon have to set up their own homes. They miss out on about four years of end-of-education experience, when they’re on the threshold of being adults.

Yale-NUS College governing board appointed

A GOVERNING board has been appointed for the Yale-National University of Singapore (NUS) College, which will open here in 2015.

It will be headed by Madam Kay Kuok, executive chairman of the Shangri-La Hotel.

The other members are:

- NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan
- Yale University president Richard Levin
- NUS humanities dean Catherine Bendel
- Yale University vice-president and secretary Ms Linda Lorimer
- Former United States ambassador to China Clark T. Randt Jr.
- Deputy secretary (policy) of the Ministry of Education, Mr Ng Chee Meng
- Prudential/Coopers Singapore executive chairman Guram Bumerjashvili
- Asociados president and CEO Chong Siok Ching
- Mr Rohind Bettis, founder and chairman of Chelsea Piers, which developed and operates the Chelsea Piers Sports Entertainment complex in New York City.

How much will you be involved in the running of Yale-NUS College?

The whole idea behind the college is an education of choices. Our students will spend the first two years studying subjects which they’ve chosen from the sciences, humanities and social sciences and also engage in co-curricular activities.

Then, in their third year, they will choose a major from some subjects, as well as an elective, say, creative writing.

What’s your greatest challenge in pitching this to parents?

The main thing with them is: “My child is not equipped with a professional qualification? what job will there be for him or her?” But we’ve had lawyers and doctors who have become chefs. We’re lucky that we’re in a country that allows such freedom of choice.

Parents must be confident that they’ve given their child the best education and the latter will use that well.

What would you say to critics who can’t see how the liberal arts could thrive here, with the death penalty and bans on homosexuals’ behaviour and protests?

Well, these are areas in which I am a little more pragmatic. My policy is live and let live. I’m very open and don’t say anything is good or bad unless it is good or bad. Certainly, you don’t go around murdering people or inviting hatred, but issues you have mentioned are sometimes taken out of proportion.

But for society to thrive and grow, we must be open and as well as have rules and regulations for a sense of law and order. Singapore has been so successful in the past 20 years. But we must remember that we are in Asia and dealing with the Asian psyche, which is more inhibited and conservative than the West.

Given this gap, might NUS need Yale more than Yale needs NUS?

I’m not sure if it’s one needing the other more. This merger is a good opportunity for both to come together and create an educational concept that will allow education system to evolve and cope in a changing landscape.

Whether you like it or not, the future is global. So, if you’re a depth of understanding of what you’re studying, are exposed to cultures and multidisciplinary work, you will be a good global citizen.

That’s the core of a Liberal arts education.

Many parents have still consider that core rotten, because it produces generalists rather than specialists.

What is the end of education? To succeed in life takes discipline, diligence, drive and, most of all, integrity. That’s not necessarily something you learn in law school. Many parents want their children to be businessmen, but how would they cope with failure?

So you’re saying Yale-NUS wants to fume out entrepreneurs?

That’s right. NUS and Yale both bring with them tools for them to think creatively, interactively positively, and our students must take calculated risks to learn how to be tenacious and resilient.

Can’t help thinking that the best entrepreneurs, the Kuoks included, succeeded hugely without all that learning.

The entrepreneurs of old were very organised. It was absolutely gut feel for them, I believe that one is born an entrepreneur and, sometimes, it is just a little less and go with the flow and hope that gut feel will help you cope.

That way, you’ll do what you feel is best for yourself and your business, rather than have it programmed into you.

But aren’t Yale-NUS be programming entrepreneurs?

Well, doing business in today’s competitive world is different from what it used to be. It’s more structured these days and you need the benefit of lessons to navigate the financial sector and make sense of rules and regulations.

It’s just not gut feel any more.

Have you risked your reputation for this college?

I wouldn’t see it as a risk. I see it as believing in the need to broaden our education system. In the world that I grew up in, there were fewer demands and far less challenges and stresses, but I benefited from a broad-based education and have used everything I’ve learnt, in one way or another.

CRISP, careful and endearingly feisty, lawyer and hosteller Kay Kuok believes that IQ is a given and so is its EQ, or emotional intelligence, that determines whether one succeeds or fails in one’s career.

Here she is on:

Deciding to read law

“What did I know of the law then? That judges went to court to crown in gowns and wigs.”

Success

“It’s measured by how much you want for yourself and how much you’re prepared to work to achieve it.”

The essence of success

“You have to fail to succeed, then pick yourself up and say, ‘I’ll learn from this and move on’.”

The best thing parents can do

“Give their children roots but also wings.”

What she told her two sons when they were in school

“That my responsibility is to give them the best education. What they do with it is their prerogative.”

How she would reassure parents that their children will do well at the new Yale-NUS College

“Well, we can’t. We don’t know.”

Putting university education in perspective

“The piece of paper that you come out with in a key to open the door to the world. But who you are as a person, not that key, will determine whether or not you are at the big table.”

Being a grandparent

“It’s much more fun being a parent because you can just enjoy your grandchildren and send them out to their parents at the end of the day.”