



Kwok Kian Woon.
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The first region-wide
Tatler Ball was
held at The
Londoner Macao

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Tatler

Chef visionaries
and their culinary
philosophies,
ushering in a new
era in arts education
with University of
the Arts Singapore
vice-chancellor Kwok
Kian Woon, and the
unforgettable
moments from the
first region-wide
Tatler Ball

TatlerBall
AT THE LONDONER MACAO

THE SCENE

A New Era in Arts Education

Appointed as the first vice-chancellor of the University of the Arts Singapore, Kwok Kian Woon discusses what the new institution means for Singapore and its cultural education *By Aun Koh*

In the heart of Singapore, a new chapter in arts education is unfolding with the establishment of the University of the Arts Singapore (UAS). At its helm is Professor Kwok Kian Woon, a seasoned academic whose career spans across several prestigious institutions. While the first intake for the university commences this year, Kwok started his appointment at the beginning of 2023. As vice-chancellor, elected by the Board of Trustees, he is essentially the chief executive of the university as well as its academic and administrative head.

Kwok's journey in academia is both extensive and impressive. Starting his career at the National University of Singapore (NUS) before pursuing a PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, he has been a pivotal figure in shaping the academic landscape in Singapore. His tenure includes significant roles at NUS, Nanyang Technological University, and now UAS.

Reflecting on his journey, Kwok says: "It's been a privilege that comes with many responsibilities, especially in building the institutional foundations for learning and research. In shaping successive generations of graduates and creating new knowledge, we're shaping the world for the better."

The formation of UAS is a testament to Singapore's commitment to elevating arts education. It is an alliance between the country's two most prestigious arts institutions: the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa) and the Lasalle College of the Arts. This union, Kwok is quick to state, is not just a merger but a collaboration that respects the individual identities and strengths of both institutions while fostering a synergistic environment.

The formation of UAS was no easy feat. Kwok shares: "A steering committee, led by Professor Chan Heng Chee, and comprising the Nafa and Lasalle presidents as well as key members of the Ministry of Education, academia and the cultural sector, worked tirelessly over two years to work out the alliance between the two institutions under a university structure that was empowered to award degrees."

Formally incorporated in August 2022, UAS is Singapore's seventh university. Jose Isidro "Lito" Camacho was appointed as its chairman of the board, while Kwok was brought on in his current role.

"The UAS," Kwok explains, "is not writing on a new page in a new book, but rather adding a new chapter in a fascinating story of arts and arts education that dates back to the early 20th century in Singapore."

Interestingly, he reminds us that the concept of a dedicated arts university in Singapore dates back to the mid-1990s, when the National Arts Council's Committee on National Arts Education, which included Dr Soh Kay Cheng, Brother Joseph McNally and Kwok himself, recommended its creation in a report titled *The Next Wave of Creative Energy*. He reflects: "It's somewhat uncanny that I was a member of the 1995 committee that recommended the founding of an arts university, and this came to fruition [with me at the helm] more than a quarter of a century later."

When asked about his vision for UAS, Kwok emphasises a collective approach. He believes in a shared vision that is not dependent on a single leader but embraced by the wider arts community and the public. "Our immediate challenge," he states, "is to build a culture of trust among all members of the two institutions and the

university-level leadership. We must consolidate our individual strengths, creating a unified yet diverse learning environment."

He firmly believes that education is about the holistic development of individuals. "I've personally learnt this precious lesson from remarkable artists who were at the same time dedicated teachers, especially Kuo Pao Kun, who tragically left us in 2002, and Tang Da Wu, who, at 80 today, continues to engage students attentively in his work." Echoing the words of pianist Fou Ts'ong, he continues: "First you must be a person, then an artist. Our mission is to develop our students not just professionally but as complete human beings."

This philosophy resonates with the Singapore government's vision for UAS, as shared by Education Minister Chan Chun Sing. The focus is on creating new and sustainable value propositions in arts education, connecting Singapore to regional cultures and inspiring a sense of contribution among all Singaporeans.

Kwok sees the role of a university beyond just education, especially when it is established in a period marked by global crises and rapid technological advancements. He offers: "We're embarking on a strategic planning exercise that covers crucial areas such as academic governance, financial sustainability, teaching, learning and international engagement. Our aim is to prepare our graduates for a world that's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous."

Reflecting on the legacy of UAS and its role in nurturing future generations of creative minds, he says: "We stand on the shoulders of pioneer artists and educators, and it's our responsibility to carry forward their vision."