

Joseph Sung, 2003 Sars hero and former Chinese University president, to lead medical school at Singapore's NTU

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A former Chinese University president and gastroenterologist hailed as an “Asian hero” during the Sars epidemic in 2003 has been appointed as the medical dean of Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and will move to the city state next year.

Joseph Sung Jao-yiu, 60, took the helm of Chinese University as its president and vice-chancellor in 2010, after years spent in teaching and research, before deciding to step down in 2017.

The gastroenterology scientist, who called Hong Kong his “sweet home forever” in a social media post on Tuesday, said he was both sad and excited about the move, but added he did not view it as truly leaving Hong Kong, as his family would be staying in the city.

Sung, who served as associate dean of Chinese University's medical faculty before becoming president, had remained with the faculty as a professor, and currently serves as director of two key research entities, including the institute of digestive disease.

He was best known outside Hong Kong as the lead doctor during the city's fight against severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) in 2003, for which *Time* magazine dubbed him an “Asian hero” for his contributions.

During his time as president of Chinese University, Sung was popular among students, especially after he visited protest scenes during the 2014 Occupy movement to engage in talks with young demonstrators. He repeated that last November, when he visited the university's campus in Sha Tin to talk with protesters during the height of months of social unrest.

“My friends, it is with sadness and excitement that I disclose my plan to you ... that I will be taking up a new job at the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore as Dean of Medicine and Senior Vice President starting March 2021, turning a new page in my life,” Sung wrote on his Facebook page.

In a 400-word post titled “Moving to Singapore”, Sung said artificial intelligence and health care were his vision and passion and that NTU would provide a wonderful opportunity and a “good platform to develop this field”.

Now I have to say goodbye to all my friends at home, Hong Kong. I do not consider myself leaving Hong Kong, as my family and my mother are still living here. Singapore is only three hours away by flight, and I have asked my wife to save some dinner for me,” he said.

“[But] my excitement stems from having this great opportunity to help developing a young medical school and coordinating life science research at a vibrant university, a top institute not only in Asia, but also in the global league.”

He also noted he was proud of the world-renowned health care workers who had led Hong Kong through Sars and were still fighting the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, adding he hoped to tighten academic bonds between his home city and Singapore.

I am not playing [on a competing] team. On the contrary, I hope my move can help to bring Hong Kong and Singapore closer in academic collaborations

Renowned Sars doctor and former Chinese University president Joseph Sung

Sung wrote: “I have to bid farewell to my friends in academia. I am not playing [on a competing] team. On the contrary, I hope my move can help to bring Hong Kong and Singapore closer in academic collaborations.

“Don’t be surprised next time when you see me on a jogging trail in Hong Kong. I will be here very often. Hong Kong is my sweet home ... forever!”

In a statement, an NTU spokeswoman said Sung would formally begin his tenure on April 1, succeeding current dean of medicine Professor James Best, an endocrinologist from Australia who would be retiring after nearly seven years in the position.

Sung was unanimously recommended after a global search by a search advisory committee.

The statement also quoted NTU president Professor Subra Suresh, who said he was delighted that Sung would be joining the university and that he was looking forward to working with him to drive the school's aspirations in health, medicine and life sciences.

NTU was ranked the world’s 13th-best university according to the QS World University Rankings 2021, while Chinese University was ranked 43rd.

Sung’s departure is one of the more significant departures of a member of Hong Kong’s intellectual elite in recent memory.

Last month, it was revealed that several teaching and research staff members from the University of Hong Kong’s Department of Microbiology, including its department head, would be departing the university. It was understood some of them may have planned to leave Hong Kong.