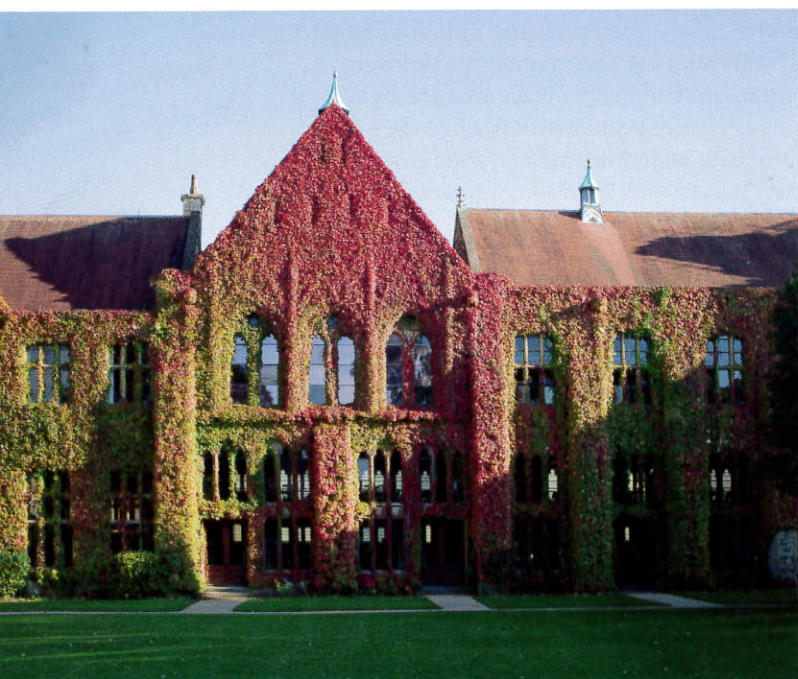


Ladies Who Lead

Su-Mei Thompson's parabolic career was kickstarted at Cheltenham Ladies' College, where her socks fell down but her sights were raised, writes **Liz Heron**

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HEN SHE ARRIVED IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE FROM Malaysia at age 12, accompanied by her mother and a large trunk, Su-Mei Thompson had hardly ever left her home country before—let alone visited the UK or Cheltenham Ladies' College (CLC, pictured below). “Although we weren’t terribly well off, both my parents worked very hard and lived frugally because they were determined to invest in the best education they could give me,” she recalls.



Thompson’s first memories of the elite girls’ boarding school are its impressive buildings and, most of all, “the green uniform, which was very proper in a very old-fashioned way.”

“We had to wear a cloak with brown leather gloves on Sundays to attend church,” she recalls. “We had elastic garters to keep our knee socks up—but my garters were always getting loose, which left my socks pooling mid-calf and round my ankles. And for some reason, we had to wear two pairs of knickers every day—a white pair underneath and a green pair on top.”

As a primary pupil in Kuala Lumpur, Thompson had attended Alice Smith, an international school with high academic standards and a strong music and drama department. Together with her family’s Confucian values, the experience put her in good stead at the highly academic girls’ school.

“Going on to CLC was fantastic because it’s also extremely strong in the performing arts and has the annual Cheltenham Music Festival on its doorstep,” she says. “Girls are encouraged to perform in the festival, which is quite a thrill. CLC is very strong academically, of course, and I had a series of incredibly inspiring teachers who left an indelible impression on me. They set a very high bar and helped the girls reach it—whether it was in our studies, the arts or sports.”

Thompson read law at Cambridge, gained a Master’s in Law with distinction at Oxford, and became the first female MBA graduate on the dean’s list at the IMD business school in Lausanne. A string of senior management positions followed at companies including the *Financial Times*, Christie’s and Disney. Since 2013, Thompson has been giving back to CLC by being a member of its council—the governing body of the school.

“My experiences at CLC cast a long and rich arc over the rest of my life,” she says. “CLC instilled in me the courage to try new things and the grit to persist in the face of adversity. And it honed my ability to get on with people from different backgrounds—and to forge consensus wherever possible.”

Now making waves as a member of the Equal Opportunities Commission in Hong Kong and CEO of The Women’s Foundation (TWF), a non-profit dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls in the city, Thompson detects the influence of her school days here, too. “CLC made me realise that women can do anything that men can,” she says. “Helping women and girls to be more confident is a big part of what we do. Some of the most fulfilling moments in our mentoring programmes at TWF come from seeing what happens when women start to believe they can walk into any room and have any job and any life they want.”



PAYING IT BACK Su-Mei Thompson is CEO of The Women’s Foundation