You cannot call Margaret Chan boring. The former journalist and actress has reinvented herself yet again as a university lecturer. She tells Tan Hsueh Yun about the rocky path to being taken seriously.

Over crisp wedges of green onion pancake, she says it was all part of a plan to build a career beyond the stage.

She says: “I told myself that when I was getting old, I had to plan a career and it had to be grounded in scholarship.”

The opportunity to do this presented itself 10 years ago when her husband John was posted to London by his employer Shell. She and their two children Cara, now 29, and Jonathan, now 30, uprooted and went along.

“It was a rare opportunity,” she says. “I had married very young (at age 23), then became motherhood and you rarely get a moment to say, ‘This is my time!’

Not that it was all plain sailing.

In her plummy British accent and quite without theatre, she talks about the rocky, hard-fought transition from journalist and actress to serious academic.

There is a certain somberness about her, with not a trace of diva-like airs. Her ex-colleagues in journalism might remember her as being a lot more flamboyant — one of them says she turned up at work in hot pants once.

Dr Chan still looks striking — long, shiny raven hair and fair skin — but dresses like an academic now: loose V-neck top, long beige skirt, sensible shoes.

But flashes of the actorly Margaret Chan emerge during the interview.

“There are the bursts of exuberant laughter when she talks about her students.

She also poses gamely for the camera, flashing a broad smile and saying that it is an art to appear to eat without actually eating.

The story of her grit and determination is no laughing matter, however. It would make cockroach-crushing matriarches everywhere very proud.

Having decided to go back to school 24 years after graduating with a degree in business administration from the old University of Singapore, she came up against the age issue.

She says she asked around about scholarships or awards she might apply for to fund her studies, but friends told her never to worry — she might try if she ever decided to go back to the stage.

With a small grant from Shell, she embarked on her master’s degree, alongside students in their 20s.

She describes with a wry smile how they were leaping around gracefully in their leotards.

“I couldn’t leap around,” she says. “I was overweight, perimenopausal. So I had to use my voice to impress the instructor.”

Deep, velvety voice aside, she had to grapple with being in the old girls.

Before moving to London, she put down her favourite dog, a 13-year-old cavie which would not have survived the six-month quarantine in wintry London.

“I was wretched,” she says. “Moving home is no joke. I thought I did very badly in the first part of the course, but pulled myself together.”

She has been a journalist, a restaurant reviewer and a stage, television and film actress.

Who could forget her role as the cheerleader in the play Emily Of Emerald Hill, or that famous “I’ll crush you like a cockroach” line she uttered as a fearsome Penang matriarch in the otherwise forgettable 1994 soap Masters Of The Sea?

At the age of 56, when most people are contemplating retirement, Margaret Chan is embarking on a new career as a faculty member of the Singapore Management University.

On July 1, after about three years of working in her office of student life and lecturing part time, she will be a Practice Assistant Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies in SMU’s School of Economics and Social Sciences.

And by the way, it’s Dr Chan.

In 2002, she obtained a PhD in theatre and performance studies from Royal Holloway, University of London. That came after a master’s in performance studies from the Central School of Speech and Drama in London — actor Laurence Olivier’s alma mater, she points out.

Why the switch from acting to academia?

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SMU did, however, have an opening for a senior manager job in its now defunct communications studies centre, to teach remedial English. She applied.

It was the sort of job more suited to someone in her late 20s, a middle-management post. So why did she, a PhD holder, want it?

But, she says: "At 52, I was starting at a low level, with no work capital. That's why I had no problem working a senior manager's job."

After 10 months, she was promoted to assistant director in SMU's office of student life and, in April last year, she became an associate director there. She also began lecturing part-time in post-modern theatre studies and creative thinking in 2004.

The move up to fully fledged faculty member represents no small victory.

She says: "I thank SMU. They gave me a chance and didn't just write me off. But I had to earn it."

And how.

In the office of student life, she was tasked with being the "creative director" for various university events — the official opening ceremonies when the university moved to its permanent campus in Bras Basah last year, organising its conviction ceremonies and setting up arts and culture groups such as a samba drumming group, a campus radio station and, naturally, a theatre group.

She describes with the nights spent helping students with their productions, staying up till 2am or 3am.

"Just ask the security guard, I'm usually the last to leave," she says. "But to do this, you do need support. If my husband did not give me that support, it wouldn't have worked."

Her family is a close-knit one, she says. Daughter Cara is a lawyer in Tokyo. Her son, Jonathan, whom she describes as a hunky water polo player with six-pack abs, is finishing national service and is the sort of son who opens car doors for his mother.

"My greatest joy was raising my children," she says. "I used to ask myself every night what I had done for them physically, culturally, spiritually, religiously and socially."

They were also the reason she "went to work with a vengeance".

"The best thing you can do for your children is to get out of their hair," she says.

"You need to give them space to grow."

And even while she embraces academia, she is not leaving her other passions — for writing and for the stage — behind.

Dr Chan reckons she might want to play the role of Emily one more time.

Emily, of course, refers to Emily Gam from the Stella Kon play Emily Of Emerald Hill — a tale of a woman's rise through the ranks of kitchen politics in a Peranakan household.

She first played the role, a two-hour monologue, to critical acclaim at the 1985 Arts Festival while seven months' pregnant.

She would later perform it twice in Edinburgh for the Commonwealth Arts Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, both in 1986.

In 1993, she reprised the role in a tribute to the late president Wee Kim Wee.

"I'm a bit old, but I'd like to try," she says. "I have only one Emily left, and maybe I should do it one more time."

She also wants to do research into Chinese puppetry groups in Singapore with a view to writing another book. Another idea involves her going around Singapore and writing about the sounds, energies and feelings that certain places evoke. The title — Wandering Of An Auntie.

"Everything I do, I do with gusto. It's my intense love of life. I ask myself why I have this passion. It can be so tiring."

With a knowing smile, she adds: "But I just can't help it."