

## Professor Chia-Wei WOO

Citation

Institutional founders are a different breed. They are potent personalities with a dream to chase and energies to burn. They stand firm, see far and drive hard. They neither flinch nor retreat. In the case of Prof Chia-Wei Woo, founding president of HKUST, he can best be described as a paradox: a man of boldness and exactitude. Perhaps, he and his colleagues can only be described in Biblical terms, as men and women who parted the waters and literally moved mountains to build Hong Kong's miracle university.

Prof Woo found fame as the first ethnic Chinese American to head a major US university — San Francisco State University. But he secured his place in history as an architect of HKUST. Building a university from scratch is a daunting challenge. Building a world-class university in a hurry is an impossibility. But for Prof Woo, nothing was beyond the pale of possibility.

At the time he was called away from the presidency of San Francisco State University, things were not exactly looking rosy for Hong Kong. It was a place to be *going away from*, not a place to be *coming to*. The city was then in the throes of political uncertainty, with its fate about to be decided by a tug-of-war between its then and future sovereign powers. Many of the city's elite were hedging their bets with a foreign passport in their hand and patriotism on their lips. During the 10-year lead-up to 1997, Hong Kong was hemorrhaging talents seeking the safer shores of America, Canada, or Down Under. Attracting first-rate academic talents to a city in flux was

essentially swimming against the current, for the brain drain was becoming a raging torrent.

But Prof Woo was undeterred. He was given a mission. And he was here to complete it. He reached into his bag of tricks and decades of academic friendships. He practiced the wily and wise ancient Chinese art of earnest entreaties — calling repeatedly in person upon his targeted quarries in the best tradition of Liu Bei's respectful cultivation and courtship of Zhuge Liang, the supreme tactical master of the Three Kingdoms. Wherever he found them, he charmed and cajoled them into coming on board, often camping out on campuses and in hotels near their place of abode. This was a process he was to repeat for several years, until his "hit list" was filled and his faculty needs met. In this he had nothing but his strong conviction and iron will. He did not offer them the promised land. Instead, he preached a duty to serve what was soon to become part of the Motherland. Those who wavered finally succumbed to his dogged importunings and passionate sincerity. Methodically but painfully, Prof Woo had assembled his stable of tip-top talents at a time of turbulence in Hong Kong. These chosen men and women would soon propel the fledgling university to the forefront of academic excellence. Prof Woo is a miracle worker of the first order.

As for Prof Woo himself, he was blind to his own needs. He burned his bridges; he did what Winston Churchill would have approved: "Leap, and the net will appear." But he did more. He leapt,

but not before cutting his own net by spurning an offer from The California State University System to hold his university professorship in abeyance pending his return from his Hong Kong mission.

“To get top academics from across the world to join me in a reverse exodus to Hong Kong, I must first totally uproot myself. Otherwise how can others believe me?” Such is his leadership style.

In a city with an uncharted future and a university with an unproven record, fundraising was a task not for the thin-skinned or the ill-connected. After a prolonged absence of more than 30 years from the city of his childhood, Prof Woo was essentially a stranger in a Hong Kong that only speaks the language of money and financial returns to institutions that are known quantities. Fortunately, he found a formidable ally in the doyen of local politics, Sir SY Chung, founding Council Chairman of the University, and some say, the guardian angel of HKUST. This indomitable duo managed to pry open the wallets of the rich and the powerful. Together with men and women sharing the same vision, Prof Woo created the best young university man can design and human ingenuity can build.

Before returning east, Prof Woo was already a giant in American higher education. In 1983, he ascended the presidency of San Francisco State University at the relatively young age of 45. By then he had already made his name in the field of physics, with some 120 papers and books in various branches of the discipline to his credit, demonstrating his scientific leadership in supervising the research work and thesis preparation of 25 doctoral and postdoctoral students.

Academic and social honors came copiously to Prof Woo. These included fellowships of the American Physical Society, and the California Academy of Sciences, the Alfred Sloan Research Fellowship, the Eleanor Roosevelt Humanitarian Award by the United Nations Association, the Golden Key of the City of San Francisco which did the unusual thing of declaring a “Chia-Wei Woo Day” in his honor. He held honorary professorships at Physics Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Fudan University, Shenzhen University, and Peking University. In 1995, he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Letters by Georgetown College. The following year, he received a Distinguished International Service Award from the University of Minnesota and an honorary Doctorate of Science from Washington University. Back in the east, he was recognized for his miracle-working powers, by being appointed an honorary “Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE)” by Queen Elizabeth the Second of Great Britain. After the handover, in 2000, he was awarded the Gold Bauhinia Star by the Hong Kong SAR Government, followed by the “Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur” by the President of France.

The list of his extra-academic honors is long and elongating. Governments and private industry flocked to him for wise counsel. In Hong Kong, he served on the Industry and Technology Development Council and the Board of Overseers for the Institute of Biotechnology. He was appointed a Hong Kong Affairs Advisor, then a Member of the Preliminary Working Committee and subsequently a Member of the Preparatory Committee by the Central Chinese government. He also sat on the Selection Committee for the Chief Executive of the HKSAR. Later, in 1998, he served on the Commission on Strategic Development of the HKSAR. The Central Government also

appointed him to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. In 2000, he was named to the Council of Advisors on Innovation and Technology of HKSAR and Chairmanship of its Committee on Hong Kong-Mainland Technological Collaboration. A much sought-after public speaker, Prof Woo made multiple appearances at the World Economic Forum at Davos.

He is an early advocate of Hong Kong-Shenzhen cooperation who coined the term “Hong Kong Bay Area” more than a decade ago to describe the close-knit southern part of Pearl River Delta. For the City of Shenzhen, he serves as a Senior Advisor to the Municipal Government; the only non-Mainland Member on the Government’s Policy Decision Advisory Committee; Chief Advisor on Higher Education Development; Advisor on the planning of Southern University of Science & Technology; and Director of Shenzhen-Hong Kong Development Research Institute under the auspices of the Peking University- HKUST Institution for Industry, Education, and Research which he helped found. He said: “Whatever I do for Shenzhen is also in service of Hong Kong, because the two cities will surely become but one metropolis in the foreseeable future.”

He is also a darling of private industry, serving on several corporate boards, including Lenovo Group, Shanghai Industrial, and First Shanghai, as well as a Senior Advisor to Hong Kong’s Shui On Group. Outside Hong Kong, he advises a number of universities in China, as well as Senior Advisor to The College Board, the largest non-profit educational organization in America. Naturally, Prof Woo is listed both in the “*Who’s Who in America*” and “*Who’s Who in the World*”.

But no honor or honorary title can ever replace the one that is gloriously his alone: “Founding President of HKUST — the world’s fastest-climbing young university”. The high rankings of the University in general, and the stratospheric rankings of its Business School in particular, continue to feed off his early efforts. His paternity is evident in the DNA of this young university. Through lofty rankings and frequent visits by adoring overseas delegations of curious academics or leaders, this University continues to pay silent tribute to its founding father.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, on behalf of the Council of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, I have the great honor of presenting to you Prof Chia-Wei Woo, President Emeritus and University Professor Emeritus, of HKUST for the award of Doctor of Business Administration *honoris causa*.