

Dr CHAN Cho Chak John

Citation

John Chan has done for size what Barack Obama has done for race. He is living proof that when it comes to leadership, size doesn't matter. In America, the average CEO is at least three inches taller than the average man in the street. In egalitarian Hong Kong, the only thing that matters is the size of one's intellect.

Dr John Chan's formidable intellect ensures that he is an active participant in Hong Kong's transformation from a third-world backwater into a world-class metropolis. Along the way, he has played a multitude of vital roles. His career shuttled back and forth between the civil service and commerce. In his public servant incarnations, he was a City District Commissioner for Hong Kong Island, and Assistant Director of Home Affairs in the mid-1970's. For 18 months following that, he was Private Secretary to Governor MacLehose, a giant of a man, whose only condition for hiring him was that they never appeared together in any public photo.

Dr Chan briefly left government service, when he joined Sun Hung Kai Finance Co Ltd as its Executive Director and General Manager in a two-year hiatus. But before long, he was back in the public service where he was destined to occupy increasingly important positions, among them Deputy Chief Secretary from 1987 to 1989, Secretary for Trade and Industry from 1989 to 1991, and more importantly, the ticklish and taxing portfolio of Secretary for Education and Manpower from 1991 to 1993. It was during his tenure that the five teacher training colleges

were merged to form the Hong Kong Institute of Education as part of the government's effort to enhance the professionalism of the teaching profession. Henceforth, all teachers, whether they were teaching in primary or secondary schools, must be degree-holders. Dr Chan was cognizant of the fact that the quality of teachers goes to the heart of any meaningful reform in education.

But Dr John Chan's most lasting contribution to Hong Kong came in a different capacity. In the mid-1980's, a critical and highly sensitive period in Hong Kong's history, he was innocently called the Deputy Secretary in a government special unit with the non-descript name of "General Duties". In the thick of the Sino-British negotiations over the future sovereignty of Hong Kong from early 1984 to late 1985, Dr Chan was the only ethnic Chinese member of a triumvirate that constituted the conduit channeling Hong Kong people's nagging worries and concerns about their future to the British negotiation team. These anxieties and concerns were later adequately reflected in the Joint Declaration and the subsequent Basic Law, the now famous mini-constitution validating the world's unique political arrangement. Under this arrangement, Hong Kong was allowed to retain its own legal and financial systems, and its own distinct way of life, while being returned to rightful Chinese sovereignty. This bifurcated "One Country Two Systems" concept was so unique that it has no parallels in the world. Its success, in no small measure, is a result of Dr Chan's 20-hour working days during that critical period. There were no antecedents to guide Dr Chan's

work. It was all “play-by-ear” ingenuity, and Dr Chan played his part to the hilt. His significant role in this uniquely reconfigured system has never been publicly acknowledged. For this alone, he deserves a permanent place in the important footnotes of Hong Kong’s annals.

But Dr John Chan’s other contributions are more visible and can be seen in the recent chapters of Hong Kong’s history. He is an apotheosis of versatility, a man with the Midas touch. As a city of finance, it would be inconceivable if Dr Chan had not left his imprint on its financial system. He served the Hong Kong Securities Clearing Co Ltd as its Chairman from 1994 to 2000, and was a Council Member of the Stock Exchange of Hong Kong from 1993 to 2000. For his sterling service to the development of Hong Kong’s securities market he was awarded the Gold Bauhinia Star in 1999.

After he left government service in 1993, he turned his talents to running one of Hong Kong’s iconic public transportation systems, the Kowloon Motor Bus Company, guiding its transformation from a family-owned business into a well-oiled model corporation that grows its tentacles of service with the suburban growth of the city. Under his stewardship, it enjoyed a prolonged period of industrial peace, dependable service and profitability. He retired after 13 glorious years as its Managing Director in 2008.

In the domain of community service, Dr Chan’s name is also linked to another fairy tale success, the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology which he served with distinction as a founding member of the Council, and later during his six years as Council Chairman. He guided its development with his strategic vision and wisdom, helping to draw up its blueprint for development.

He continues to serve the university as its Court Chairman. While still Council Chairman, Dr Chan was also elected Chairman of the Hong Kong Jockey Club and the Hong Kong Club, thus creating the unprecedented situation in which two key Hong Kong institutions shared the same diminutive but mighty chairman. For old Hong Kong hands, the Hong Kong Jockey Club was a pillar of power and benevolent influence in the city. It is a major supporter of local charities and educational causes, of which HKUST has been a big beneficiary. Though a familiar public figure in Hong Kong, not too many people know how energetically this relentlessly busy man serves the causes of charity. He has been Chairman of the Council of the Sir Edward Youde Memorial Fund and was an active leader of the Community Chest of Hong Kong for nine long years, coinciding with his chairmanship of the Prince of Wales Hospital Governing Committee. For four years beginning 1995, he was a member of the Board of the Hospital Authority of Hong Kong.

In Dr John Chan we have a wise leader who knows Hong Kong inside out, and is its faithful servant through and through. Many admire him for his mastery of the English language. We admire him even more for his ingenuity and integrity.

Mr Chancellor, on behalf of the Council of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, I have the high honor of presenting to you Dr John Chan, non-executive director of Transport International Holdings Ltd, for the award of Doctor of Social Sciences *honoris causa*.