Ir James Kwan is not yet a household name. But he ought to be one. For over 36 years since joining The Hong Kong and China Gas Company Limited (commonly known as 'Towngas'), he has been at the heart of the operation that brings gas to tens of thousands of Hong Kong households. In fact, his professed mission in life is to provide customers with a safe, reliable supply of gas that comes with caring service, while working hard to protect and improve the environment. The customer base has grown from just 50,000 in the early days to 1.7 million today. On the Mainland, the market is far bigger, with 12 million household users all over China during the last 10 years.

Two major issues that have riveted global attention today are energy and the environment, and Ir Kwan is right in the thick of both. That is why he is an important player in our society, and is destined to play an even bigger role in China’s 12th 5-year plan with its emphasis on energy conservation and emissions reduction. Locally, he has launched the ‘Low Carbon Action’ lifestyle educational campaign, inviting our young people to make a personal pledge in leaving a low-carbon footprint.

What he has done for his company, for Hong Kong and for the country may not be headline-grabbing, but it is durably significant. He is the man behind many of the innovative measures adopted at his company. Although he started out in gas distribution, he was the one who set up the company’s first Marketing Department in 1987. Subsequently, he became the first Chinese to ascend to the powerful position of General Manager of Engineering. Though trained as an engineer, he has an uncanny sense of what marketing is. To Ir Kwan, the secret of effective marketing comes down to observing and understanding customer behavior, so as to provide products and service to improve the quality of life. The no ordinary ‘Towngas Avenue’ is one of his ingenious marketing successes that blends fusion food, gas appliances, and lifestyle products in one store. By the beginning of 2003, he was promoted to his present position as Towngas’ Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer.

As chief architect of the magnificent supply chain, he applied his technical know-how to bring about many engineering breakthroughs, including the development of the so-called ‘trenchless technology’ for underground pipe installation, resulting in reduced disruptions of roadwork throughout the territory. He is an eager champion of new technologies and strategies friendly to the users and the environment. For his many outstanding contributions to the engineering profession, he was inducted into the Hong Kong Institute of Engineers Hall of Fame in 2010.

But he was more than just an outstanding engineer. His foresight was responsible for helping to lock in a 25-year contract for the supply of natural gas that has translated into huge savings for local consumers. Gas is a green energy. Most people in talking about renewable energy, think only of wind...
or solar power. Surprisingly, in Hong Kong, they are only small scale projects. The big projects here are from landfill gas. In tackling technical problems, he is unafraid to seek expertise from outside his company. A strong believer in the dictum that "industry must work with the university and with the community" he has promoted collaboration between the two. His company has worked with HKUST on a biomass-to-gas project, as HKUST is the only local university with a chemical engineering department, and Towngas is the only company with a gas production plant.

Other measures friendly to the environment include the recycling of consumers’ discarded gas appliances. This program has kept 1,700 tonnes of scrap metal from our landfill sites in the last 3 years alone.

Ir Kwan has a heightened sense of corporate social responsibility. Under his leadership, Towngas is the leading utility company in organizing volunteers, not just from its own ranks but also, unexpectedly, from its customers. It even has its own girl guides, formed by the daughters of its employees, to teach them to become good citizens. He is a proud honorary member. We don’t often associate utility companies with charity. And yet, under his guidance, his company has been distributing rice dumplings, moon-cakes, hot soup and turnip cakes to the elderly and the needy.

A celebrated professional engineer, Ir Kwan helped establish the Gas Discipline of the Hong Kong Institution of Engineers which he headed as President in 2004-05. In fact he is the founder of its Gas and Energy Division. On the strength of his professional reputation in bringing Hong Kong gas industry to an international platform, he was the first Chinese to be elected as the President of the UK-based Institution of Gas Engineers and Managers in 2000/01. By honoring him, this international body is honoring Hong Kong standards in gas engineering.

Educated at the University of Hong Kong with an honors degree in Mechanical Engineering, Ir Kwan obtained an MBA degree from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Later, when he had the chance to further his technical education, he chose to go to Harvard University for its Advanced Management Program, believing that in his leadership role, his ability to ‘think out of the box’ may serve him and his company better than mere technical expertise. His leadership in environmental protection is bearing fruit. Out of 144 entrants and a total of 555 environmental projects, his company has walked away with the Grand Award in the Pearl River Delta Environmental Awards competition, jointly sponsored by Hang Seng Bank and the Federation of Hong Kong Industries. With him at the helm, his customers and the community can feel perfectly safe about their energy future, for he is a man with a caring corporate heart with his eyes firmly on the big picture.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, on behalf of the Council of The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, I have the high honor of presenting to you Ir James Kwan Yuk-Choi, Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of the Hong Kong and China Gas Company Limited, for the award of Honorary Fellowship.