

Honorary Fellow

Mr Karl C Kwok

Citation written and delivered by Professor Christian Wagner

Pro-Chancellor, Council Chairman and President:

A Sportsman

“I am a sportsman, not an adventurer.” Owning a number of yachts in succession named “Beau Geste” and having won the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race in 1997, one of the world’s most demanding regattas, the assumption of adventure seemed only natural. Yet Mr Kwok explained that winning a sailing race had actually much more in common with operating a successful business. “You need a good team and you must have total preparation. Races are logistical nightmares, requiring preparation for many eventualities. And, while they are physical, they are largely mind games. The equipment matters of course, but everyone can build a good sailboat. You have to have the right horse for the right course. And you have to have a bit of luck.”

Mr Kwok described how he discovered his passion for sailing. “I actually learnt to sail on French Lake, near Faribault in Minnesota.” Studying overseas at Carleton College, in Minnesota, he was invited by a local family to spend a weekend at their lake cabin, where he was able to practice on a 12-foot Hobie Cat. Later, back in Hong Kong, the opportunity arose to co-own a sailboat. Thereafter the passion has never waned.

College Years

“At Carleton College, I learnt the value of a liberal arts education,” Mr Kwok explained. His father had asked an old family friend where to best send his son. “Carleton”, was the answer, a small (1,200 student body then), prestigious liberal arts college, with a long tradition and record of excellence in co-curricular activities. “I always wanted to be a doctor, but attending Carleton changed my life,” Mr Kwok said. Studying for his Government and International Relations major, he wrote a timely thesis on Middle-East settlement, almost 40 years ago.

Mr Kwok’s own experience also raised his hopes for the transition to a four-year degree in Hong Kong. “I was a strong supporter of President H K

Chang's emphasis on adding a dosage of liberal arts to CityU's programmes," he exclaimed. "I therefore also welcome the transition to a four-year degree. It will finally enable CityU and other Hong Kong universities to educate students more than before in a liberal arts tradition."

After completion of studies at Carleton in 1971, an MBA at the renowned Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania followed, in preparation for eventually joining the family business.

Family Business Values

"I suppose business is in every Chinese person's DNA, and in our family we lived and breathed business from early on. We are a third-generation family business with over 100 years of history," Mr Kwok reminded. Being part of such a successful family tradition brings responsibilities. "In the past, it was difficult to recruit managers and executives from the outside, based on professional management skill. Employment would thus be based on family, village, or clan ties. I have learnt from that," Mr Kwok remarked. "Today there is no pressure on children or family members to go back into the family business."

Business was not always easy, and especially the 1980s brought unique challenges. "One of our businesses was banking, and to be profitable in banking was difficult. With liberal government policies, the very large multinational banks had a distinct advantage. They had huge balance sheets and could better weather the storms in an environment which had no central bank as a lender of last resort." For the Kwok family it meant having to seek support from Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), and ultimately selling the banking operation to HSBC's subsidiary, Hang Seng Bank. It also meant that much of the family's assets went into sustaining the banking operation when it struggled. "We had to protect the name of the family and its reputation," Mr Kwok added. "While saving the bank cost my side of the family most of its entire assets, it also made us the majority shareholder in the firm."

"I have learnt much from those times," Mr Kwok explained. The greatest lesson was to forgive everyone. "Blessed are the peace makers. There is no point in looking back, no point in seeking vengeance, no point in blaming."

The 1990s brought more prosperity, with growth in the department store business. "We are one of Hong Kong's few remaining department store businesses, and we are unique in our vertical integration, sourcing predominantly directly

from manufacturers,” Mr Kwok elaborated. “Department stores may be a mundane business yet we also view it as a family tradition. And as one of the few remaining local department stores, we have a social responsibility and reputation to maintain. We benefited greatly when Seiyu bought 48% of the operating subsidiary in the 90s. They were one of the last investors from Japan, before the late 90s bubble burst.”

City University

“In 1998, I received a cold call from President H K Chang, inviting me to CityU’s Council.” At the time, Mr Kwok already had involvements as a Trustee with Chung Chi College of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, but President Chang assured him that there would be no conflict of interest. As a member of CityU’s Council between 1998 and 2006, Mr Kwok also served on several committees, including the Executive Committee, the Audit Committee, and the Honorary Awards Committee, while also chairing the Human Resources Committee, and the Advisory Committee for Graduate Employment.

“City University is a young university. There is a lot of energy here and the ability to change and move forward. Other universities with 50 years or more of history have so much inertia that change can become difficult.” Mr Kwok also pointed out that being a young university, CityU must look after its alumni. “They will create word of mouth for the success of the university and will be important to raise funds. You have to foster the network of alumni.”

“Under the circumstances, CityU has done very well,” he summarised. “Everyone and every institution has their own special role to serve the community, and CityU has embraced its role.” He had only one more wish for CityU “... less unnecessary infighting among stakeholders.”

Community Engagement

In the late 1990s, Mr Kwok’s community engagements escalated. Having distinguished himself as a premier sportsman in Hong Kong, leadership roles in Hong Kong’s sports organisations were inevitable. Mr Kwok became Chef de Mission of the Hong Kong Delegation to the Sydney Olympics in 2000, and Chef de Mission of the Hong Kong Delegation to the Eastern Asian Indoor Games in 2007, as well as Chairman of the Coaching Committee of the Hong Kong Sports Development Board before their restructuring. Mr Kwok is currently Vice President of the Sports Federation and Olympic Committee for Hong Kong, China,

President of Hong Kong's Sailing Federation, and member of the 5th East Asian Games Planning Committee and the 2nd Hong Kong Games Organising Committee.

Mr Kwok's public services included Council membership of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Chung Chi College, and Chairman of the Hong Kong-America Centre.

How is it possible to balance these commitments with the role as Chairman of the Wing On Group, one of Hong Kong Stock Exchange's listed companies? "I work five and a half days each week, including Saturdays until noon. But I also have a good management team, and I have three brothers with me in the company. They encourage me, as we all need to give back to society."

About Hong Kong

Having thrived with Hong Kong's prosperity, Mr Kwok is optimistic for Wing On and for Hong Kong. "We had a banner year in 2007," he remarked. "Hong Kong is a dynamic place, but it is also compact. The future of Hong Kong in the 21st century will be its role as a major city in China. We must look beyond Hong Kong and recognise how we can be of service to the Pearl River Delta. This will be a key to Hong Kong's success." He is also glad to mention CityU students' interest to work in China. "Learn Putonghua and move north. Ten years ago, few students wanted to work in China after graduation, but this has now changed."

Parting Words

What would be next for Mr Kwok? Despite his very busy schedule and the many responsibilities, he expressed his eagerness to find more occasions for service to the community.

And, as we finished our conversation, Mr Kwok characteristically remarked, "Make it short, I don't like publications about me and I don't like hoopla. I cherish privacy."

In recognition of Mr Karl C Kwok's many accomplishments and contributions to the development of the University, Mr Pro-Chancellor, Mr Council Chairman, and Mr President, I have the great honour to call upon you to confer on him the award of the title of Honorary Fellow.