

Honorary Doctor of Social Science

Mr Bernard Charnwut CHAN

Citation written and delivered by Professor Paul LAM Kwan-sing

Mr Pro-Chancellor:

Mr Bernard Charnwut Chan is a well-known figure in Hong Kong's business, government and public service circles. His family hails distantly from Chaoyang in Guangdong and more directly from Thailand, where his grandfather, beginning as an immigrant with meagre means, eventually retired as the founder of the biggest banking corporation in that country.

Mr Chan was born in Hong Kong. Even though he still refers to himself from time to time as an overseas Chinese from Thailand where other branches of his family reside, he increasingly feels that home is where the heart is. And having dedicated himself to the welfare of Hong Kong for many years, there is no question that he now regards Hong Kong as his home.

Today, Mr Chan is the President of Asia Financial Holdings Ltd and Asia Insurance Co. Ltd. As an active participant in public service, he is now a deputy to the National People's Congress of China and a non-official member of Hong Kong's Executive Council. He is also Chairman of the Committee on Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food, of the Steering Committee on the Restored Landfill Revitalisation Funding Scheme, and of the Advisory Committee on Revitalisation of Historic Buildings; and he is Chairperson of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service.

Mr Chan represented the insurance industry at Hong Kong's Legislative Council from 1998 to 2008, and served as Chairman of the Standing Committee on Disciplined Services Salaries and Conditions of Service from 2001 to 2006, the Council Chairman of Lingnan University from 2008 to 2014, the Chairman of the Council for Sustainable Development from 2009 to 2015, and the Chairman of the Antiquities Advisory Board from 2009 to 2012. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 2002 and awarded the Gold Bauhinia Star in 2006 by the Hong Kong SAR Government. In 2004, he was appointed a Commander (3rd class) of the Most Noble Order of the Crown of Thailand.

Life is not all smooth sailing for Mr Chan, however. When he began his university study at Pomona College in California, US, at 18, he was diagnosed with Takayasu's arteritis, a rare disease that was to turn his life upside down. It took him three major operations over three years before his conditions stabilised. But for the rest of his life, he would have to follow a regimen of daily medication and regular hospital visits. Like other patients who come face to face with a serious disease, Mr Chan initially went through phases of escapism, denial and blame. However, he eventually came to terms with his condition, which in retrospect, he regards as a blessing in disguise. He is convinced now more than ever that things happen for a reason. The realisation that life is fragile prompted him to ponder at an early age his priorities in life. Such reflection has made him all the more determined to live life to the fullest without regrets.

Mr Chan's contributions to Hong Kong are multi-faceted. In the highly contentious society that Hong Kong has become, Mr Chan's role is legendary as the bridge-builder across Hong Kong's wide political spectrum. In his work in the Legislative and Executive Councils, he is able to bring together diverse and sometimes even opposite positions for productive conversations. As the relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China grows closer and closer, he urges the need for wide and in-depth consultations. Frank exchanges built on trust have thus become all the more necessary than at any time in Hong Kong's history. He believes that he is able to win the trust of his colleagues because of the lesson that he gained from his disease: to live for the moment and to focus on the task at hand. When it is clear to other people that he is interested in doing a good job with no personal axe to grind, they are more than willing to work with him.

As a third-generation member of a successful business family, Mr Chan is acutely aware of the need to keep up with the times. It is not enough to hold on to past glories in business as much as in life, he maintains. As he works diligently to safeguard the business interests of the family, he is always looking out for new directions to develop. His forebears have prospered as bankers, but with his unique insights on the evolving economic landscape in Hong Kong, he has wisely invested heavily in the insurance business. Mr Chan is also a strong advocate of corporate social responsibility. He warns against the unrealistic expectation that government can provide solutions for all the problems that may come to confront Hong Kong. He encourages the business sector to play an active role in constructing a better society for all, thus alleviating the prevalent feelings of hostility that the general public seems to harbour against the business sector. Making monetary contributions to worthy causes is but the beginning

of philanthropy these days. A responsible corporation is one that has the vision and the will to take active steps to promote the well-being of all its stakeholders.

So extensive is Mr Chan's involvement in public service—environmental and business sustainability, care for the elderly, higher education and experimental elementary education, heritage preservation, immigration, single parenthood, good dietary and health habits, the promotion of the arts, among others—that his contributions in this area are hard to enumerate. Of these, Mr Chan considers the period when he served as Chairman of the Antiquities Advisory Board and of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service as particularly significant. Both afforded him the opportunity to deepen his understanding of the place he calls home. The work at the Antiquities Advisory Board opened his eyes to the varied history of Hong Kong and led him to consider how best to preserve Hong Kong's cultural heritage. His work at the Hong Kong Council of Social Service, especially the many site visits to social service providers that he made, alerted him to the needs of people at the grass-roots level, and revealed in concrete terms the variegated nature of Hong Kong society.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, Mr Bernard Charnwut Chan stands as an inspiration for all of us. His personal battle with Takayasu's arteritis is a testament to the durability of the human spirit. He works tirelessly and selflessly for the interests of Hong Kong in diverse ways, giving us a vision of a brighter and better Hong Kong. I request the University to confer upon him an Honorary Doctor of Social Science.