

## Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa A Citation



### Professor Lao Yung-wei (Lao Sze-kwang), BA

Lao Yung-wei is one of the greatest living Chinese philosophers. The author of more than 30 monographs, his work plays a vital role in bringing Chinese philosophical traditions into fruitful conversation with those of the West. At home as much with Kant, Hegel and Wittgenstein as with Zhuangzi, Mencius and Wang Yang-Ming, Professor Lao has developed an original approach that extracts useful elements from diverse reflective traditions.

As a young scholar in the nineteen-fifties, he spent much of his energy studying the major figures of the Western philosophical tradition such as Kant, Hegel, Collingwood, Rousseau, J.S. Mill, Toynbee, Cassirer, Quine and many more. Among these figures, the influence of Kant has been the most crucial and lasting one, as is seen in his much-acclaimed book, *Essentials of Kant's Theory of Knowledge* (1957, 2001). With this solid background in Western philosophy Professor Lao found his way back to a more thorough treatment of the Chinese philosophical tradition.

Throughout his entire philosophical itinerary, Professor Lao has been an eloquent exponent of the originality of classical Chinese philosophy in relation to that of the West. In sharp contrast to the "China-centred" position adopted by most other Chinese philosophy specialists of Chinese origin, Professor Lao has emphasized the necessity of considering Chinese philosophy within the entire setting of "the world-philosophy to come" (*Essays on Cultural Problems, 1957, revised and enlarged edition 2000*). He has also consistently defended the need for a problem-oriented and open-ended concept of philosophy, as opposed to the system-based, exclusive doctrines that dominate many other philosophical schools. It was in this spirit that Professor Lao has written a complete three-volume *History of Chinese Philosophy* (1968-1981, 1984-86).

Professor Lao's interests are not merely theoretical, but practical. Some of his main concerns have been with the history of Chinese culture and its expression in contemporary socio-political realities. Some of his major books include *China's Way Out* (1981, 2000), *Lao Sze-kwang's Essays on Social and Political Issues* (1989), *Disenchantment and Legislation* (1991) and *New Reflections on the Future Developments of Chinese Culture* (1993). His main questions have been: How does a culture evolve and endure? What socio-political issues are problematic and in need of our critical attention? How does Chinese culture rejuvenate itself when it has been through political upheaval and social crisis? The deep humanistic sources of his thought emerge from his emphasis on the need for moral introspection, self-criticism and social reform when something has gone wrong in a society. In his famous book, *The Punishment of History* (1971, 2000), he gives a compelling analysis of the self-delusive false consciousness produced by powerful ideological systems. At the same time, Professor Lao writes not simply as a critic, but as one who shares the historical responsibility. His constant theme is that the whole culture must share the debt of history as a first step to facing the reality of the present. Drawing on Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist traditions as well as on modern Western critical and liberal thought, he produces a



picture of the individual that is at once new and traditional. For Professor Lao, we are primarily moral subjects, called to a spirit of inner freedom and respect for an objective social and political order.

Professor Lao's great gifts as a teacher are the fruits of his profound philosophical research. As a lecturer he has the ability to use simple language to achieve both clarity and depth, even when he is explicating the most subtle themes. In seminars he exhibits a formidably sharp critical mind, but never uses his position to indoctrinate his students to his own way of thinking. Though he commands the greatest respect from his students, he never plays the role of "the master", but helps the students to make up their own minds. Like his philosophy, his teaching is based on open-ended inquiry and a respect for a diversity of views. Many younger philosophers owe their devotion to the discipline to Professor Lao's influence.

Professor Lao came from a long distinguished family. His great great grandfather, Lao Congguang, was the Governor of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces who signed the first Kowloon Treaty on behalf of the Qing Government. He was also an esteemed scholar, who wrote among other works a book on the interpretation of the *I-Ching*. Professor Lao had a great aunt, Lao Junzhan, who was a famous mathematician trained in France, and his father, Lao Jingjiu, took part in the 1911 Revolution and worked closely with the founders of the Republic of China.

Brought up in such a scholarly family, Professor Lao had a solid foundation in the Chinese classics, and began to show a precocious talent in both prose and poetry at the age of seven. After graduating from high school in 1946, he studied in the Department of Philosophy, Peking University, where he was taught by the renowned scholars Hu Shi, He Lin and Tang Yongtong. Later, when the Kuomintang withdrew from the mainland, he completed his studies at the University of Taiwan. In 1955 he moved to Hong Kong and taught at Chu Hai College. In 1964 he began his long association with The Chinese University of Hong Kong, when he was appointed to the Department of Religion and Philosophy. He retired formally from the Department in 1985, yet served the University for another decade by occupying successively such posts as senior research fellow of the Institute of Chinese Studies as well as senior college tutor of Shaw College. It is during his 30 years of service to the Chinese University that he wrote most of his important books and gave leadership in the role of Head of the Graduate Division of Philosophy. Professor Lao also played an important role in designing the part of Chinese Culture of the Integrated Basic Studies (IBS) programme at Chung Chi College - a series of general education courses that have shaped the lives of generations of College students. One major output of Professor Lao's occupation with the IBS programme was the publication of his much acclaimed book *Essentials of Chinese Culture* (1965, 1998), which today remains a bestseller for university students and general readers.

During his time at Chinese University Professor Lao was a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University, 1969-1970, and twice a Visiting Fellow at Princeton University, 1970 and 1975-1976. After his retirement in 1985, he was a Visiting Professor at Tsing Hua University, Taiwan, 1989-92, Normal University, Taiwan, 1990, Chengchi University, Taiwan, 1992-93, Soochow University,



Taiwan, 1999- present, and from 1994 he has been Chair Professor at Hua Fan University, Taiwan. He has also returned on several occasions to the Chinese University, notably in 2000-2001, as a Visiting Professor of the Department of Philosophy, in the year of Chung Chi College's 50th Anniversary. He taught courses in the Philosophy of Culture and Comparative Studies of Eastern and Western Philosophy, which gave the younger generation the precious opportunity to be taught by him.

Professor Lao's contributions to Chinese philosophy have won him prestigious awards and honours including the Distinguished Academic Achievement Award from the Phi Tau Phi Scholastic Honour Society, and the Culture Prize from the Executive Yuan in Taiwan. He is also an Academician of the Academia Sinica, Taiwan since 2002. He is only the third philosopher, after Hu Shi and Feng Youlan, to be so honoured. In this same year of 2002, Professor Lao was also conferred the honour of National-Endowed Chair Professorship by the Ministry of Education, Taiwan.

A distinguished calligrapher and poet, Professor Lao once expressed his profound reverence for the philosophical enterprise in a brilliant couplet:

While the boundless horizons of truth extend beyond words  
Let the limited writings of men be left to posterity

The philosopher, the lover of wisdom, is at home in a limitless realm of thought, well beyond the boundaries of our language. Professor Lao's life work reminds us of the high ideals of the philosophical calling, as well as its abiding social and political relevance.

Mr Chairman, it is my honour to present to you Professor Lao Yung-wei, renowned philosopher, dedicated teacher, analyst of Chinese culture and defender of humanistic values, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.

*This citation is written by Professor David Parker*