

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*  
A Citation



**The Honourable Donald Yam-kuen Tsang, JP**

Aesthetic sense, attention to detail, and pride in a good job well done are qualities needed in a first-rate carpenter. Observation, persistence, careful tracking of evidence and putting it together, courage when needed, and resourcefulness in times of threat, are qualities one can find in a first-rate policeman. Our Financial Secretary seems to draw quite naturally on the legacy of qualities I have mentioned, for his grandfather was a carpenter, his father a policeman. Yet his unexpected love of the elegant bow tie signals his own special kind of creative flair. This very personal flair allows him to arrive at creative solutions to some of the problems that beset his government; his sober, intelligent grasp of practical matters; his stubborn will to succeed; his focused energy; all these have served him and his beloved Hong Kong extremely well. His love for Hong Kong is unconditional. He was homesick for it when he was a year at Harvard.

A third generation Hong Kong person, he was born in 1944, when there was still no end in sight to the war with Japan. He grew up as the eldest of six children in the post-war re-establishment of British rule and has lived to see the demise of the British empire, the difficult birth pangs of the People's Republic of China, the creation of a new kind of market-force socialism, the pragmatic doctrine of one country two systems, and most recently, the magnificence of Beijing's fiftieth anniversary celebrations. In such times individuals cannot but be moved. And senior civil servants with the talents of Mr. Tsang cannot but be aware of a solemn and yet exciting sense of destiny in the unfolding of human history. For him, Hong Kong is a place where many different peoples may bring their talents to keep Hong Kong striving to maintain its free, risk-taking spirit, its internationalism, its dynamic energy, its sense of adventure, and its peoples' entrepreneurial skills. For him, Hong Kong people have now found both an identity that is their own and a great pride of place. Mr. Tsang, like many others, takes great pride in local achievements.

He was educated at Wah Yan College, a local Roman Catholic school, where he maintains strong ties. His religious education by Jesuits gave him a sense of duty, service, and determination; his teachers were at times excruciatingly demanding. Yet he found time to read widely for pleasure and improvement outside the confines of the curriculum. This method, always advised by the best teachers, including Dr. Samuel Johnson, helped him to deepen his command of English and develop a powerful and independent mind. Now that he is buried almost up to the bow tie in government documents, he still finds time to read, for pleasure, fascinating, well-written non-fiction. In the days when university places were so few that only a minuscule number of Hong Kong students could get into the one medical school, his father pressured him to become a doctor. It was not to be. Instead he left school



for the work force and very soon, in 1967, joined the Hong Kong Government civil service. This gave him the stability and the opportunities to discover, test, and develop his remarkable talents.

It also served him well by sending him off to Harvard, when he was in his mid-thirties, where he gained a Master's degree in Public Administration. Here he had to come to grips with econometrics and modern managerial techniques. He still keeps in touch with some of his professors. At Harvard he found himself in a very carefully selected class of talented and hard-working young people among whom he found many firm and faithful friends from a wide variety of backgrounds. He has kept up these friendships with now influential people in a number of different countries and cultures. They have been part of his inspiration.

During three decades of government service he has held many different positions in the Administration, including being District Officer for Shatin, shortly after his return from Harvard. The most significant of his jobs have been, of course, in finance, trade, and the issues arising from inter-governmental plans for the future of Hong Kong. Between 1985 and 1989 his responsibility was implementation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Between 1991 and 1993, he became Director-General of Trade and Chief Trade Negotiator. He was thus responsible for all facets of trade negotiation and administration for Hong Kong. Further responsibility, and promotion, arrived in May 1993 when he became Secretary for the Treasury. This post gave him the heavy responsibility for the overall resource allocation of the Hong Kong Government, its taxation system, and for the cost-effectiveness in the development and implementation of Government's policies and programmes. In September 1995 he was appointed Financial Secretary, being the first non-British civil servant to be appointed to this post in Hong Kong. In the years leading to the change of sovereignty he also tackled the issue of British passports for Hong Kong people. His firm, even relentless pursuit of Westminster about this met with a measure of success. If history always has to run its course, we must yet admire him for his principled stand and what he achieved in the face of greater powers. His gritty, sometimes unpopular determination, has paid off.

As Financial Secretary he has had to contend in the market place with both bulls and bears. He has taken initiatives to build a healthier and a stronger financial system for Hong Kong and the immediate region, doing much to revitalize business and help us out of a recession that, according to some commentators in the alarmist press, could easily have turned into the nightmare of another great depression. It is a significant fact that he retained this position across the hand over, thus serving the outgoing colonial government and the post-colonial SAR government. This is a remarkable testimony to his ability and steadfastness. He is a person on whom many have depended, in a region of government that now has a status somewhere above that of an ordinary province of China.

For his thirty years of long and very faithful service to Hong Kong people under British



administration, he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire in June 1997, thus gaining a title. The newspapers Sing Tao Daily and Hong Kong Standard named him Leader of the Year in 1997.

Collecting a reputation as a trouble-shooter in his various government posts, Sir Donald finds that there is no substitute for a careful study of any problem that arises, looking at it methodically, seeking a solution that has the best chance of working, given the various constraints, rather than following pre-conceived ideas; seeking also an imaginative solution with a chance of lasting, rather than leaping hastily into ill-conceived improvisations. There then needs to be a large dose of determination to carry well-planned actions through to their right conclusions. As a realist, he is keenly aware that some problems, regrettably, are insoluble.

His work with the Harvard University Outreach Programme shows his concern for the good of young adults in an international context. This perhaps follows from his own family and his role as a caring father. He wants to secure our future as well as present prosperity. To secure this future, we need thinking people, creative people, and critical intelligence geared to our needs; we need to be keenly aware of technological change.

This interest in the young people is also reflected in his long-standing association with The Chinese University of Hong Kong. He visited United College and met with members of the University back in the days when he was the Shatin District Officer. He graciously officiated at the opening of our MBA Programme's Town Centre in 1997. He was guest of honour at the 20th Anniversary Ball of our Federation of Alumni Associations in 1998. Earlier this year, he was Guest Speaker at our Forum on the 1999-2000 Budget jointly organized by the Faculty of Business Administration and the Department of Economics. This occasion was an extremely useful one for the staff and students because it afforded open and significant discussion of a number of matters such as the Cyberport, taxation and public expenditure, the restructuring of financial institutions, and the introduction of mainland talent into the Hong Kong equation. Mr Tsang has enjoyed many debates and talks with our students since the early eighties.

Norman Douglas wrote that 'No great man is ever born too soon or too late.' Mr. Tsang emerged just when Hong Kong needed him. He is certainly the man of the moment.

About four hundred years ago Sir Francis Bacon wrote that the four pillars of government are religion, justice, counsel, and treasure. Donald Tsang is a perceptive counsellor, a Financial Secretary who has managed the government's treasure very well, even during recession, and a religious man who values each day his quiet times reserved for prayer in St. Joseph's Church, Garden Road.

A monarch may have ennobled him but his culture, his education, his family, and his



own integrity made him what no monarch can create: a gentleman. Because of the daily press we all think we know a good deal about him. Yet, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, he is a gentleman whose worth you know well, for he is an old friend of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. It is now my special privilege to present one of our ablest leaders, The Honourable Donald Yam-kuen Tsang, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.