

# THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

## THIRTY-SIXTH CONGREGATION

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa*

### *A Citation*

#### **Mrs. Esther Yewpick Lee**

Concerning the passage of time, the most used metaphor in the Chinese language is 光陰似箭 (Time flies like an arrow). When looking back at the history of the University, the history of Hong Kong and indeed the history of the world, this phrase easily springs to mind. In October 1963, the month and year the University was established, Sir Alec Douglas-Home was taking over from Harold Macmillan as Prime Minister of Britain, President John Kennedy was nearing the end of his thousand days at the White House, and in China Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping were repairing the damage done to the country by the hasty Great Leap Forward. And Mr. Chancellor, in 1963, you yourself were serving your first posting in Beijing.

In the month of October twenty-five years ago, the Chinese University of Hong Kong came into being at an inaugural congregation at the City Hall on the 17th day of the month. From that first congregation until his death twenty years later, in 1983, Dr. Richard Charles Lee was the Vice-Chairman of the University Council and he, besides bountiful donations to the University, gave also generously of his time and wise counsel. Giving him the emotional and moral support that he needed to discharge his many public and private duties was the woman the University is honouring today, Dr. Lee's widow, Mrs. Esther Yewpick Lee.

Mrs. Lee comes from one of Hong Kong's old families, being the daughter of Joseph Wong Mou-lam, who for many years had been the comprador of Watson's, the chemist. At the age of 17, Esther Wong met and fell in love with the young Richard Lee, Oxford graduate and son of Mr. Lee Hysan, at a society picnic. The wedding in 1928, sixty years ago, between the eldest son of the Lee family and the fifth daughter of the Wong family was the social event of the year. After the marriage, it was the intention of the newly-weds to pursue further studies in the United Kingdom, but while on their honeymoon in Switzerland, Mr. Lee received word that his father had died and that as the eldest son of the family he was to return and take charge of the business empire his father left behind.

Mr. Lee, with Mrs. Lee by his side, made giant strides in his career. He became a member of the Legislative Council in 1959 and a member of the Executive Council in 1961. In the 1960's, the Lee family home was frequented by the rich, the powerful and the famous. At social dinners of which there were many, Lee Garden was the scene where "cars drive by like flowing water and horse drawn carriages mill around like dragons". Mrs. Lee played the role of the perfect hostess in public and the devoted

mother at home. The University was often graced with her presence on ceremonial occasions like congregations and formal dinners when she would be a model of propriety, grace, warmth and charm.

Mr. Chancellor, when I was a student of English Literature many years ago, I was told by my tutors to read the three greatest works ever written about women. They are, respectively, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. These are, however, stories of ill-fated women whose life ended in tragedy and disappointment. Millions of women lead perfectly normal and happy lives as wife and mother, content to play an active supporting role in the background when their husbands devote themselves to their careers and public duties. A shining example of this perhaps more traditional role for a woman is Mrs. Esther Lee.

Since the untimely death of her husband in 1983, Mrs. Lee has taken on a higher profile in public. She is today the Chairman of Garden Hotel (Holdings) Limited, a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and Honorary President of the Hong Kong Society for the Protection of Children. Like her late husband, Dr. Richard Lee, who left a bequest of \$20 million to the University for research, academic and campus development, Mrs. Lee is a generous philanthropist in her own right and has helped countless people in countless number of ways.

Mr. Chancellor, in 1963 the University started out with 1600 students in three faculties; today it has 7300 students in five faculties. The growth in student numbers has been rapid, orderly and well conceived. The quality of our graduates has also improved steadily through the years. Central to a good university is the enthusiasm of its Council, Senate, academic staff and students. We are very fortunate indeed in having had, in the Council, the enthusiastic support of such wise men as Sir Quo-wei Lee, Dr. P.C. Woo, Sir Kenneth Fung Ping-fan, Dr. J.S. Lee and Professor Y.C Wong who were with us at the University's inception and who are still with us today. One member of the Council who served the University as well as any had been the late Dr. Richard Charles Lee. We take great pleasure, therefore, in honouring Dr. Lee's widow, Mrs. Esther Yewpick Lee, on this our 25th Anniversary. Dr. Lee and Mrs. Lee will, incidently, be the only husband and wife who have both been honoured by the University, Dr. Lee having received his Doctor of Laws degree in 1964 at our first degree-awarding congregation when the degree of Doctor of Laws was also conferred on Dr. Clark Kerr who is here today.

With these words, Mr. Chancellor, I present Mrs. Esther Yewpick Lee, philanthropist, protector of children, friend and supporter of the University, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa*.

October 6th, 1988