

A Special Issue for the End of an Era

Not long after President Chia-Wei Woo announced his retirement, some of us in the AA office were reflecting on the fact that this would be the end of an era. An era that began before the University was founded, and during which it grew to international stature. It seemed like an opportune time to put out a special issue of the AA Newsletter to mark the event. We decided against a "tribute" to the President - there will be plenty of more distinguished people praising his accomplishments over the coming months. Alas, we can also expect the usual counterpoint of sniping from his "friends" in the media. In any event, Chia-Wei needs no greater tribute than the continued growth and development of HKUST, which will be his legacy long after his critics have been consigned to history's dustbin. Instead, we thought it might be nice to share with the academic community some reminiscences by people who have experienced life in the Chia-Wei era. What we have here is a random selection of memories from an almost random selection of people.

Peter Dobson

Hoops!

In the early days of HKUST, Chia-Wei was often seen on the basketball court. In fact, if you have wondered why there is a court on the outdoor car park at LG-6, it is because when the University opened, many of the sports facilities were not ready yet and having a place to play basketball was essential. **Professor Donald Chang**, one of the founding members of our Biology Department, recalls those days:

The first thing I remember about Chia-Wei is from our basketball games. When the campus was first built, there were only a small number of faculty and senior staff members. We were very eager to find ways to keep us fit. One of the most popular recreational activities for the faculty members was to participate in the basketball games that were held on every Wednesday evening. Chia-Wei was a very enthusiastic basketball player. Given his age and physical condition, it was not possible for him to outrun or outjump some of our young faculty members, but he was never daunted. He would fight hard and dribble the ball past his competitors. And he was a good shooter too; he could shoot from different corners of the court. On more than one occasion, he scored quite a few points for his team!

During that time, I was a devoted basketball player too. Often, Chia-Wei and I were teammates. But

sometimes, we played on opposite teams. Then, we had to fight it out on the court. But no matter on which side we played, we both enjoyed the time we spent together on the court and we had a lot of fun in those days. In fact, in the first few years of my campus life, Wednesday evenings were a time that I very much looked forward to. That was the time which provided us with good exercise and a very good opportunity to enjoy the friendship of our colleagues.

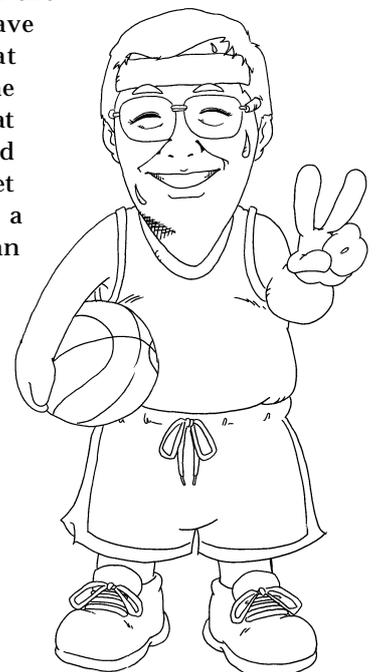
With the progressive expansion of the University, we got more and more occupied. At the same time, more and more young and energetic players showed up at the basketball games. And it gradually became less fun for the old timers. Eventually, we had to find other ways to maintain our fitness. Nevertheless, I think that Chia-Wei, like me, will probably treasure those good old days.

Professor Vincent Shen, the founding Head of Computer Science, also recalls those basketball games, and compares the Vice-Chancellor's (as he was called then) styles on and off the court:

A strong leader needs to have a strong vision and the persistence to see the vision fulfilled. Chia-Wei's persistence was evident in committee meetings and on the basketball court. There were many committees and many meetings of these committees during the early days. Chia-Wei attended most of them, even the one on whether dogs should be allowed in campus residences and, if so, whether there should be a size limitation.

With his presence the discussions were mostly civil, although heated at times.

I soon discovered that if the discussion seemed to have moved away from what Chia-Wei thought best, he would not seek a decision at the meeting, but would declare that we should meet again later to "build a consensus." This meant an additional long meeting in an already crowded meeting schedule. Since we all had other demands on our time, this gave us an incentive to build a consensus (on Chia-Wei's view) in a hurry.



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Soon after we moved to campus, Chia-Wei regularly played basketball with a group of faculty and staff. My son often joined them when he returned to Hong Kong during the holidays. He asked me one day who was the person the others called “VC, VC” on the court. They all tried to get out of the way when VC had the ball. When I told him that “VC” was the title of the President of the University, he understood. Then he predicted that Chia-Wei would soon get hurt if he continued to play in that style. Sure enough, Chia-Wei was pretty badly hurt when one of our colleagues did not get out of the way fast enough. That fall may have ended Chia-Wei’s basketball career at HKUST, but his persistence remained in other areas where physical injuries were less likely.

Splash!

The President, following his retirement from basketball, moved on to aquatic sports for exercise. But he brought the same qualities to his new enthusiasm, as noted by **Professor Po Lock Yue**, founding Head of Chemical Engineering:

I see Chia-Wei at the University swimming pool more than any other place on campus. Over the last 3 or 4 years I have seen him making significant progress, going from half a lap at one go to 4 laps or more. What is apparent to everyone in the pool is the determination written all over his face, not to mention the water dripping all over it. He will forge ahead in full commitment with little hesitation, grasping the wall of the pool to regain his breath when he can no longer carry on. He will then immerse himself in water and rise for a full lungful of air over and over again as if just normal breathing will not do the trick. The picture is that of a person determined and dedicated to succeed, who will pay any price to overcome all odds against him. Sound familiar to those who know him?

Campus Developments

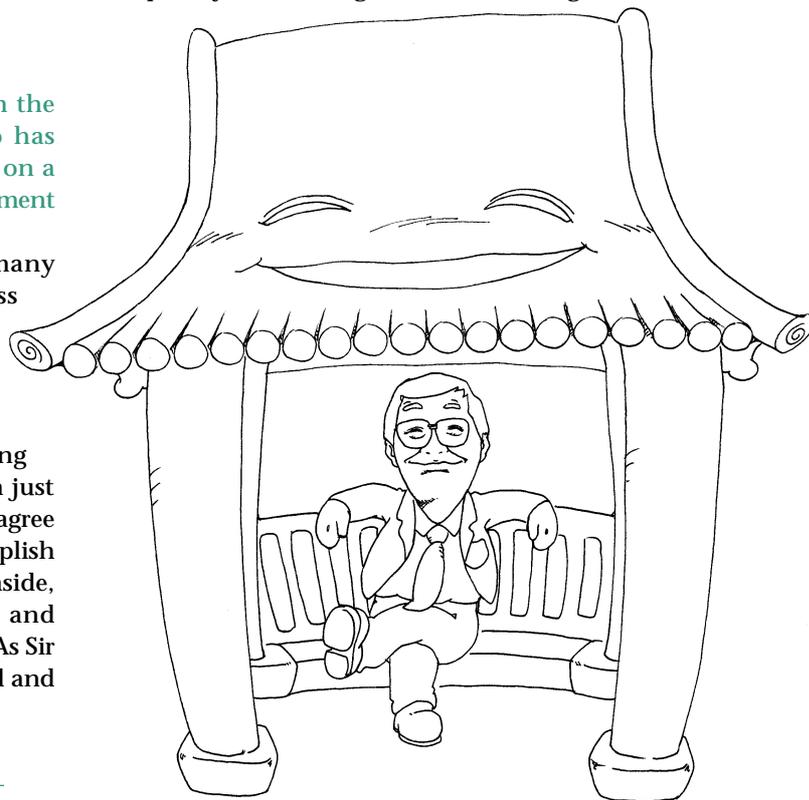
These personal observations really resonate with the comments of **Professor Leonard Cheng**, who has headed our Economics Department since it took on a separate identity after starting life as part of a Department of Economics and Finance:

The President will be remembered for many things. They include his vision of a world class research university, his unique ability in assembling the first group of established scholars to build the UST faculty, his legendary round-the-clock working hours, and his ceaseless effort to promote UST to the world and to the Hong Kong community. Judged by what UST has achieved in just ten years, most people including his critics would agree that he has succeeded in what he set out to accomplish when he became our founding president. (As an aside, initially Chia-Wei’s title was “Vice-Chancellor and President,” but the former title was later dropped. As Sir S.Y. Chung once joked, the President was too good and proud to be Vice anything.)

There is one legacy of Chia-Wei that will affect all who come onto this campus, faculty, students and visitors. What we see on the UST campus today is not only the ideas and hard work of professional architects. The President played an important role when he was a member of the Planning Committee in arguing for the existing design of our campus, even though another design won the first prize in an international competition. I have seen pictures and description of the winning design. Believe me, the difference between that design and what we enjoy today is the difference between night and day. Apparently, the tastes of the expert judges that chose the winner are very different from the tastes of ordinary folks like myself. However, we (the faculty, students, alumni, past, present and future) and not the judges have to live with what is built.

In spite (or maybe because) of his background as a physicist, four or five years ago Chia-Wei launched a campaign to make UST a genteel university. The campaign encompassed physical facilities, art works, and people who would personify gentility. The Exposition Hall and the library have provided important means of bringing arts and culture to the UST community. Numerous pieces of art have been exhibited and many artistic and cultural performances have been hosted. The modern sculptures outside the LG7 restaurant seem to be popular spots for tourists to take pictures; the sculpture near the President’s Lodge provides a vantage point for views of beautiful Port Shelter.

The classical Chinese style pavilions are also Chia-Wei’s brainchild. He would be excited to tell us where similar pavilions can be found in China, and to prove his point, he would show us pictures of the original structures. The mini-amphitheater immediately below the balcony of the LG1 canteen must have occupied a special place in Chia-Wei’s heart. He wants a special place for students to gather that will remind them of the great civilizations of humanity. It is near completion, and hopefully soon enough for him to inaugurate it.



Player Piano Player

If the previous stories make Chia-Wei seem a bit too serious, this story from **Dr Steve DeKrey**, Associate Dean of Business and Management, reminds us that he has always had a well-developed sense of humor:

In January of 1998 the Kellogg/HKUST EMBA program held its inaugural dinner at the Mandarin Oriental. As MC and founding director of the EMBA program, I was responsible for the evening's entertainment. Guests included Dean Jacobs and Provost Dumas of Northwestern and President Chia-Wei Woo, Dean Yuk-Shee Chan and Council Member Ronnie Chan of HKUST, plus many dignitaries from both schools. After the introductions and brief talks including a photo opportunity it was time for the dinner. At the mic for the last time I mentioned that we had a special piano program planned for the dinner and I wished all guests well as I left the stage and reemerged at the piano.

After I was seated at the piano, terrific jazz music was heard and the guests were quite impressed. At the head table our President noted the entertainment and all at his table seemed pleased. The music was quite spectacular and the audience enjoyed it even after I stood up and went to my seat for dinner. The piano continued to play. My departure from the keyboards created quite a stir as most thought I was responsible for the music. After my departure it became clear that the music came from a player piano which I had pretended to play. Those who noticed my departure were quite amused as they had thought I was responsible for the fine tune. Chia-Wei enjoyed the joke very much and was in great spirits throughout the evening.

Later, I did return to the keyboard and after turning off the machine proved that indeed I had some level of musical skill. This part of the program our President remembered well. He has on several occasions introduced me as a pianist despite my limited skill. This event represents a fond memory. Not only was Chia-Wei amused at the joke but he also enjoyed that some minor talent was later revealed.

Planning my piano joke required some risk. With such a prominent audience some could have taken offense at my prank. Our President understood the humor and rose well to the occasion. He seemed to enjoy the ruse more than anyone.



Chinese Proverb

Professor Ting Pang-Hsin has an interesting perspective on his years with Chia-Wei, which began at the side of a hospital bed:

I was considering in the winter of 1995, accepting the offer of Deanship in Humanities and Social Science at this university. At precisely the same time, Chia-Wei wanted to see me. Up till now I still clearly remember meeting Chia-Wei for the first time at the associated hospital of Stanford University where he was having bed rest after an operation. Though recovering from the operation, he was still in high spirits and told me many a thing about UST. I was greatly surprised at his strength and energy as a recuperating patient. My very first impression of Chia-Wei was therefore that of a man of unflinching drive and vigor.

Since coming on board in July 1996, I began to have more opportunities to work with Chia-Wei at meetings. At my first UAC meeting, the discussions went on from 9:30 am to 2 pm. There was no lunch or even a sandwich. His love for work is truly incredible. I am a man of regular life, and take my meals when it is time to do so. There is a Chinese proverb “*枵腹從公*,” meaning

Poetic Justice

While this was not supposed to be a tribute per se, it is fitting to include the following poem penned by **Professor Gary Biddle**, the Head of our Department of Accounting and a man who strives to prove that accountants can be creative, too!

*Keenly admired are very few men
But it happens every now and again
That onto the stage of life will stride
A leader of vision, brilliance and drive*

*Who attracts other leaders to share in a task
Of building something of value to last
Combining the skills of all who partake
Beyond the sum of the parts to create*

*Here we recognize just such a man
To humbly thank as best one can
For a nobler endeavor is hard to conceive
Than founding a new university*

*Imagine the challenge daunting in scale
But he took it on with resolve we hale
Set in motion, persevered
To an achievement we all revere*

*To you, Chia -Wei, we pen these lines
For you have also touched our lives
In the mission you have cared
In each our way we have shared*

to disregard physical hunger through absorption in official business. Chia-Wei provides a living example of this saying by an unceasing flow of vitality in his work.

Over the past four years, I have been working with Chia-Wei on many things. To me, he is extremely meticulous and has an unusually sharp memory for figures. Not only does he have a good grasp of the Government's budget for universities, but also he is able to remember clearly the much smaller financial allocations for individual items. This is a good indication of the caliber of a scientist, who is different from me as an academic in Humanities. I must further point out here that Chia-Wei is an eloquent speaker, and a living model for the Government's policy of fostering tri-literate and bilingual competency.

I have had two opportunities of traveling with him to visit our sister institutions in China. During the visitations, I could clearly see that Chia-Wei has a strong appeal to others. While being serious with official business, he has a highly attractive sense of humor, and is sharp-witted, considerate and thorough. At times, he can behave like an innocent naughty child! I have since come to realize that he has a relaxed and humane side of life in addition to his stern appearance and workaholic style in the office.

Media Relations

From time to time, the President has had his problems with the media, but here's a story from **Professor Reinhard Renneberg** of Chemistry about one instance where it all worked out well:

Soon after our start at UST in 1995 my wife Ilka got a request from DIE ZEIT, Germany's prestigious weekly, to report about the hi-tech university on a sunny beach in Hong Kong. She asked for a short interview and his secretary told us: "Be really short...20 minutes maximum! He has another meeting after this!!" Well-prepared, my wife walked in. She tried her best to ask at least one question, but was interrupted after two minutes by Chia-Wei who gave her his opinion of what the really important questions were. Two hours later, I got a bit nervous (and curious) and phoned the secretary: "They are still talking...."

After another 30 minutes, Ilka was back home with a full tape, exhausted, but happy. "What a great President you have," she said, "he speaks in such a way that you can immediately print it...." That night she wrote the story down. The next day I rushed to Chia-Wei to show him the results. It had to be shortened from a 2.5 hour interview to several lines in the paper. As I translated it into English, the President commented, "I never said this!" Full of energy, he offered, "It's better for me to write it down myself. Have a cup of tea or coffee while you wait." Ten minutes later I had his written remarks and went back home to my waiting wife.

When the article appeared in Germany, I translated again the passage with the words of my President. Chia-Wei was really impressed: "What a nice job your wife did! I wish all journalists were so smart!"



Among the staff in the AA Branch, **Professor Shain-Dow Kung** may be the most privileged in terms of his close interaction with Chia-Wei over the years. He no doubt has a lot of little stories to tell. Actually, some have already been told in the books and articles that he has published, and more will appear in the book *Ten Years at UST* that he is now writing. He tells me this is scheduled for publication the day after he retires, so that he can stay one step ahead of those he may offend! Here, he would like to share with us just a few of his observations of Chia-Wei:

I spent half of my life in the ivory towers of academy and met hundreds of University Presidents, each with his/her own style. How do I see Chia-Wei? When I

was consulted by the Council on the President's contract renewal, I frankly replied, "Well, to me, he is not quite the ideal boss that I would want. Yet, for the University, he has been the ideal founding president." His shortcomings are those that many people have. However, his strengths are really unique ones shared by very few.

In his ten-plus years in Hong Kong, Chia-Wei has learned a great deal. I guess that's why he plans to retire after his presidency instead of going into the political arena. Obviously, he knows it well himself, and he has the ability and wit for being a political figure - but probably not the patience or the right personality. His learning curve has not yet taken him to the point where he can turn his detractors into friends and his rivals into strategic allies. On the other hand, if I say he is no politician, he would probably take that as a compliment.

Chia-Wei, when you no longer have to keep talking at the meetings that I, too often, have also had to sit through, you can divert your boundless energy to other pursuits. Probably only a few people know that you have long aspired to write science fiction. That would be a great way to continue your tales of fictional HKUST students Lo Wing Keung and Fan Jialu on their own trek to the stars. We could all then share in their future adventures.

Editorial

As the editor of this special edition, I have a few stories of my own to tell. But perhaps I'll stick to one that takes us back again to the founding of the University:

When I reported for work to St John's Building in June 1989, I had barely learned how to avoid tripping over the floor sill of the security door that closed off the lift lobby when I got my first assignment. Chia-Wei and all the other senior academics (I think there were about two of them at the time) were leaving town on an important trip, probably to twist someone else's arm into joining up. In the meantime, a consultant from a company called Gallenkamp in the UK was coming to draw up a detailed list of all the equipment we would need to start a new university of science and technology. I, a veteran of less than a week who had not yet finished reading the reports of the Planning Committee, would be in charge of telling the consultant what was required. I was alternately flattered to be given such an awesome responsibility, and dumbfounded to be left holding the bag.

Well, nearly a billion dollars of equipment money later, I realize just how gutsy Chia-Wei was in those days. He was willing to take a chance on, and give a chance to, people like me who, to be honest, he barely knew. I imagine that if I had messed it up, his boundless energy would have got it back on track anyway, but this project was probably where I got a reputation for being able to make up convincing arguments about things I know next to nothing about. It was both a bewildering assignment and an exhilarating experience, and I am grateful to Chia-Wei for giving it to me. He is indisputably the founder of HKUST, but he was more than willing to let the rest of his team feel that they played a real part in building what we see today.