

Planting the seed of change

Tycoon Lui Che Woo aims to make the world better with the HK\$60 million Lui Prize for World Civilisation



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WITH a fortune of more than US\$8 billion, Lui Che Woo is one of the wealthiest men in Hong Kong. But he reckons he could be just as happy without money.

"Happiness requires only a simple mentality: One shouldn't aim too high. If you believe you are successful, your heart will be at rest," says the China-born octogenarian at his office in North Point, Hong Kong. His manner calm and assured, he emanates a feeling of being at ease in his own skin.

"I always keep a few words in mind, 'be sincere with whatever you do, the things you manage to achieve will give you peace'. It doesn't matter if I earn lots, or I don't earn much, I'm satisfied," he says.

Now aged 87 and the head of a hotel, property and casino empire, Mr Lui is considered one of Asia's most successful businessmen. He had an eagle eye for opportunity. During Hong Kong's 1950s construction boom he founded KWah Group, back then a mining company. As the city prospered in the 1960s and 1970s, he turned his company into a real-estate developer. And in the noughties when China relaxed the gambling market in Macau, he launched Galaxy Entertainment, now one of the biggest casinos in Asia.

But for all his wealth, he has not forgotten the deprivation he encountered as a child during World War II. He attributes his attitude and passion for education to these formative years. When he was four, Mr Lui moved from his hometown of Jiangmen to Hong Kong. At the time Hong Kong was occupied by Japan and Mr Lui was denied a formal education.

"The Japanese discriminated against the Chinese. They think, 'of course China is backward, they are illiterate, they can barely read their own language'."

But when you're young, "you grow in the face of hardship", he recalls. Mr Lui was the eldest of six children and the only boy; he became the primary breadwinner for his family when he was just 13. "I wasn't from any prestigious family business; my father was what you'd call laid back. He collected rent every month, and invested in some small businesses, which wasn't sustainable in the long run."

Starting point

Mr Lui's first step towards becoming the man he is today was selling peanuts during the Japanese occupation, when food was scarce and rationed in warehouses. "The business went pretty well, so I began thinking: How can I boost my sales? What should I do so I can feed and support myself? I continued my snack business until Hong Kong's hand-over back to Britain. I was very lucky to have been in the food industry. I didn't starve and I did make quite a bit of money."

A series of good connections led Mr Lui into the car-parts industry and, as fortune had it, he became a company owner aged 20. "My company encountered financial difficulties and (they) returned to China. As the Communist Party was in power a lot of things were confiscated, and their wealth remained in the mainland. So I proposed to buy the business. I was barely 20 and didn't have much money, so I paid for the company in five annual instalments."

During the war with Vietnam, Mr Lui worked with the US Army, importing car parts from Saigon back to Hong Kong. After the war, Mr Lui turned to a quarry business in Okinawa, Japan, and became the owner of one of the city's largest mines.

These days, Mr Lui is less involved in his businesses, which he has handed over to his five children. "All five of them are very cooperative and filial in helping me maintain my business. I feel very blessed to have my five children who are dutiful and obedient, and who appreciate that their father's teachings will shed light on how to live life."

For the last 20 years he has been giving back to his home country,

having donated assets of approximately HK\$6.6 billion (S\$1.2 billion) to promote education, provide medical care and poverty relief in China. It was his lack of schooling that inspired his cause. "I began to wonder, how could the Chinese raise their education standards? They need to learn how to stand up for their own country. So my passion to help others started then."

His contributions to society have not gone unnoticed. He was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) by the Queen in 1982, and a Justice of the Peace in 1986. He has even had an asteroid named after him: the Lui Che Woo Star.

Last September, Mr Lui established the Lui Prize for World Civilisation. There will be three prizes awarded annually, with a total of HK\$60 million split among three winners, to be announced in the third quarter of this year. The first prize is for sustainability, recognising individuals who have made outstanding achievements in promoting the sustainable use of natural resources for the development of the world. The specific focus for 2016 will be the safety and security of the world food supply.

The second prize recognises individuals who have made outstanding efforts to enhance the well-being and welfare of the human race. The focus for 2016 will be the treatment and/or control of epidemics, infectious diseases or chronic illnesses.

The third category is the positive energy prize, recognising individuals who have promoted positive energy in the face of adversity. This includes behaviour that inspires, energises and gives hope to others. Along with Mr Lui, the prize council that will choose the awardees includes former Hong Kong chief executive Tung Chee-hwa, former US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, former World Bank president James Wolfensohn and British Anglican bishop and poet Rowan Williams.

"I speculated on how we can emphasise more new terms such as 'positive energy', and ways people can learn to adjust their attitude or make others feel comfortable," he explains. His prize won't change the world, Mr Lui acknowledges. But it might go some way towards helping.

"Someone once told me that this dream is too idealistic, it's not a simple task. But I believe in it because it is not a simple task. I hope to plant this seed, and see if it can bloom in one year, two years, or three years. Let this notion slowly sink in. This world is a wonderful place. Well, I think it is at least." **W**

Billionaire is the global luxury lifestyle website and magazine for ultra high net worth and affluent individuals pursuing the good life



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