

2014

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Chun Kiu, Tony LAI  
*Lingnan University, Hong Kong*

Man Yin CHAN  
*Lingnan University, Hong Kong*

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### Recommended Citation

Lai, C. K. T., & Chan, M. Y. (2014). People: 40 years of social work, life-long service to the community: Mr. Chi-tong LAI, BBS, MH. Asia Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies Newsletter, 5, 3-5. Retrieved from [http://commons.ln.edu.hk/apias\\_nlj/vol5/iss1/14/](http://commons.ln.edu.hk/apias_nlj/vol5/iss1/14/)

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# 40 Years of Social Work, Life-long Service to the Community

## Mr. Chi-tong LAI, BBS, MH

Tony Lai & Emily Chan | Translation: Tony Lai | Photography: Eric Tang

*Mr. Chi-tong Lai is veteran social worker who worked in the field for over 40 years before retirement. Having been Head of AKA (formerly Aberdeen Kai-fong Welfare Association) for over 3 decades and overseen over 20 service units, involving youth and elderly services, community development and social enterprises, he is particularly expert in organising regional and territory-wide functions. For nearly half a century, Mr. Lai has not stopped his contribution to the society via voluntary work, that he continued to take up responsibilities of consultancy and other public services, including Honorary Financial Secretary of CIFA as well as Member of the Steering Committee on Promotion of Volunteer Service, etc. Lai is also the Senior Consultant of Asia Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies. Knowledge transfer is also one of his many areas of attention, that he has been the author and editor of dozens of publications on social welfare services.*

### Q: What is the string that has tied you with social work for a lifetime?

A: Looking back, my joining the field of social work is undoubtedly related to my past experience. Like many others, I was born in a poor family and I grew up in a flat cramped with multiple tenants, which was, need not to say, an unsatisfactory environment for childhood. While my parents were too busy to earn bread and butter than to take care of me closely, I have witnessed myself too much of the “wrong deeds” of some of my lower-class neighbours, that drug abusers and gambling addicts were common amongst those flock. Maybe because I had lived in such a condition, that I wished so much to help others with their difficulties in life. In 1968, there was a university student giving a talk on social work at my school before my matriculation, in which I realised the meaningfulness of “help others to help themselves” and so I decided to join the rank of social workers.





**Q: What have brought you together with elderly service?**

A: My first job was to be Assistant Youth Tutor in The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong, then I was the Student Supervisor of Holland Hostel, and afterward I entered the Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association where I helped their development of play leadership programme. In fact, back then social welfare in Hong Kong was at its infancy. After my completion of a certificate at the Social Work Training Institute as organised by the Social Work Department, I was appointed Head of Aberdeen Kai-fong Welfare Association. If you ask me about how I got involved with elderly service, then we have to trace back to 1977 when the Government had published the green paper entitled "Services for the Elderly" suggesting the strategic development of elderly care services, thus I concerted the reform by applying on behalf of the Association to the Government for the provision of such services. And by mid-90's, my organisation has already been running 2 District Elderly Community Centres. As the number of older service recipients continued to increase, my chance of interacting with elderly increased as well.

**Q: How do you comment on the performance of elderly care in Hong Kong nowadays?**

A: Pretty well, if I may say so. It is especially worth our praise when recently service provision to elderly incorporated "health" into "community care". However, since our Government subsidised heavily on NGOs to provide social services, that elderly services as provided by the private market has become more difficult. Furthermore, many elderly service providers are still unfamiliar with chronic diseases such as dementia when patients suffering such illness continue to rise, making the situation worth worrying. As for the current social workers, it is rarely seen that they will strategically adopt the approach of community development to perform elderly work. This may be due to the training given nowadays.

Elderly care service should be "need-oriented", that services should be provided in response to the needs of society. When population ages, we undoubtedly need more elderly care services to satisfy the physical, mental, social and spiritual needs of our older citizens. Social workers, as the frontline service providers, should understand what their clients need in their daily life. For elderly care services in particular, our social workers should pay attention to the special needs and individuality of different older persons, and to satisfy their wishes of a better late life by utilising wisely the available social resources.







**Q: In your opinion, in what way should Hong Kong's elderly care service go in the future?**

A: With reference to my social work experience so far, it is foreseeable that elderly of the future will be of higher education background and living standard. I think elderly services provided by NGOs should be more diversified, refined and family-styled. We should reinforce the function of elderly care within the family by providing more community care services. Only by relieving the stress of family members in taking care of the older persons that co-residence can be encouraged. Most of the elderly homes up-to-date focus more on the provision of daily activities of older persons, but the emotional support needed by older persons as well as their family members during their meeting the end-of-life is still under-developed. In response to some older persons who have attained a higher level of education, organisations should attune to the new customer preferences and provide them with suitable activities; and at the same time, social workers should better equip themselves by enhancing their social work skills as well as knowledge related to older persons, so as to provide quality services to older clients.

Of course, when advancing the development of elderly care service, the support from Government is crucial. The Government should specifically take elder representatives into their policy making process such that the opinions of the aged can be heard. Moreover, it should actively conduct research so as to explore the needs of older persons. Also, it should support the transformation of services as provided by social welfare organisations, so that eventually the wellbeing of our elderly can be secured.

Looking forward, elderly service should keep abreast of the latest developments of elderly's needs. I wish that the social services provided by elderly centres to older adults in the future can be in a form of "club membership", which will provide a vast variety of services and activities which suits different tastes and different preferences of different cohorts of elderly. Hence, if an elderly service provider wishes to expand further their services, then it should not focus only on services provided to elderly, but further strengthen the services for elderly-to-be, by helping them with their retirement planning and preparation. I sincerely wish that the elderly services would continue to flourish that more elderly can be benefited.

### Afterword

*Population ageing is already irreversible, that when more baby-boomers gradually enter their old age, the current provision of elderly care service will receive a heavier blow. As time changes, the needs of elderly change also, and thus the existing services may not necessarily suit the next generation of older adults. If we wish to turn the tide by meeting the surging demands with high quality and diversified services, we should plan ahead now.*