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Feature - Tea with the Director - Serving the aged in Asia-Pacific : Interviewing Prof. Alfred Chan BBS JP

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Prof. Alfred Chan Cheung-ming, BBS, JP, a world renowned expert in the field of gerontology, has been actively engaging in ageing issues both locally and internationally.

As the director of Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies in Lingnan University, not only does he devote great attention and passion in various types of research in identifying and evaluating gerontological issues, he also provides professional consultation and advises all ageing related matters of concern. He stresses on the importance of intergenerational knowledge transfer for promotion of life-long education, and enhancement of skills and service quality of health and social care workers.

Being appointed as the chairman of the Elderly Commission (HKSAR) as well as the consultant of the Ageing and Social Development Issues for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), Prof. Alfred Chan wishes to exert his influence to policy makers by enthusiastically taking up consultancy roles to authorities for advocating change in social policies for the betterment of living qualities for the aged.

Instead of a grand sanctuary with antiques and artworks of which one would expect to see in a high ranking academic staff's office, I met my interviewee in his humble office with steel bookshelves loaded with books and a desk covered by piles of documents.

Prof. Chan has the charm to mesmerize any audience with his speech and gesture, and he can entertain any kind of audience with a range of profound topics, even those personal or controversial.

The Ageing Challenges in Hong Kong

Tony Lai: Today I would like to ask your opinions in two directions, the first one is undoubtedly the overview of the current ageing situation in Hong Kong.

The demographical shift brought by the ageing population has emerged in many countries regardless of their being developed or developing. What challenges and opportunities has this phenomenon brought to Hong Kong?

Prof. Chan: It is well observed globally that the population of people aged 60 or above is soaring rapidly and significantly. With such high longevity worldwide, this has imposed great challenges to all governments.

Financially, it is obvious that the proportion of retirees will increase when the population of those with age over 60 grows, whereas 60 is the borderline to retire in most social systems. Many older citizens without sufficient financial comforts will be forced to rely on social securities, which will greatly increase the expenditure of the government.

The life expectancy of Hong Kong citizens is in average 85 to 86 years, and 25 percent of the whole population will be aged 60 or above within a decade or so.

Geriatric diseases were not easily noticeable in the past as the average life span of people is shorter when old-age health problems only emerge at around 60 to 70 years of age.

Let's take dementia as an example: It was rare in the past due to shorter life expectancies, but now it's a different story. Patients suffering from such illnesses increase in proportion from 10 percent to 30 percent.

Furthermore, it was only when our famous Nobel Prize winner Sir Charles Kao Kuen became a victim to dementia that the disease began to receive attention.

The implication is that geriatric diseases can strike everyone, even the genius. Degeneration is inevitable within a life-course.

The degradation of health can also incur an enormous cost to public finance of the Hong Kong Government.

Not without a chance

Tony Lai: It sounds like we're in a very grave situation.

Prof. Chan: Yet we are not totally without hope, only if we can seize the time and grasp every opportunity available.

Hong Kong is a knowledge-based economy, where professionalism, experience and

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knowledge are valued highly in the job market. It's worth noticing that elderly has accumulated these elements for decades as wisdom increases with age.

In order to tackle the shrinking work force and ever-increasing dependency rate, it is highly recommended to ask our professional veterans to continue contributing to society and not to retire too early.

We should also pay attention to the lack of development of the "silver-hair market" in Hong Kong. We have a market heavily tilted towards younger customers, yet many advanced nations such as Japan and US have already targeted consumers above 40 who appreciate products of higher value, like cars and estates.

Even though our society is ageing, we still have time to prepare for a matured ageing society before we reach the point where the dependency numbers grow larger than the working population.

It is high time for us to call for a healthier lifestyle at an early stage of one's life-course. Our physique is like machine, which needs regular checkups. We should avoid overstressing our bodies so that "a breakdown before getting old" can be prevented.

More importantly, it is necessary to promote the self-image of elders. They usually look down on themselves and think that they are inadequate or unwelcomed.

These elderly should be encouraged to pass their life experiences and wisdom to the next generation through social participation.

It is necessary for them to make friends with younger people not only to build intergenerational communication but to seek mutual care.

These all depend on the Government's policies.

Later retirement, hit or miss?

Tony Lai: Yet you mentioned deferring of retirement age. This has caused great turmoil in Europe, how would you deal with that?

Prof. Chan: The whole rationale of postponing the age of retirement is based on the situation we foresee that the working population will not be able to support the depending population in the future.

What we are doing by the deferment of retirement is to buy more time so to save more resources before the working force shrinks.

When we have the retirement line drawn at the age of 60, many of the working population who are healthy and capable are forced to leave their posts which leads to a decrease in competent work force.

As the retirement age deferred, we allow those who are willing to work to continue contributing to society. On one hand they can save up more to prepare for their own retirement, on the other, they can also save up more capitals for the society through taxations.

The case in Europe is different as they have already entered a severely aged society. They are too late to take measures now to deal with the ageing population. They have failed to accumulate enough resources to meet the needs of the elderly.

Social welfare and Healthcare

Tony Lai: You have stressed the importance of governmental interventions, but how would you comment on the roles of the social welfare sector and the health sector, as they are always at the frontier to fill the gaps where authoritative measures fail?

Prof. Chan: As I have observed, whether it is the social welfare sector or the healthcare sector, they possess a remedial rationale that they make reparative measures only when problems arise, which is not a healthy phenomenon.

They also reiterate and amplify stereotypical messages that "all elderly are begging for help".

The reality is that only 15 percent of all senior citizens in Hong Kong need social assistance, where the rest of them can actually continue to make contributions to society if they found the right channels to do so.

The social welfare sector and the health sector must instead strive to promote a positive image of elderly and to encourage them to participate more in the community.

It is always easier to shift all responsibilities of elder care to the government or charities. It is an expensive and impractical way to ask social workers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists to offer their professional services to every elderly.

There are not enough of these professionals to cope with the huge demands. Resources must be used on those who are really in need.

As a result, family should take up the responsibility to provide for the elderly. Apart from preparing individuals for their old age, we must also promote community care and ageing friendly neighbourhoods should be established.

But we must take note of the lack of formal training of community members for providing social care. It has drawn the attention of APIAS to the possibility of community training.

This is where qualifications framework comes in to recognize those who have much experience in eldercare and are skillful but have not received professional trainings to be qualified as professionals for entering into the healthcare workforce.

Government needs collaborations amongst departments

Tony Lai: As you have reiterated the importance of governmental involvement and now you have been appointed by the Hong Kong SAR Government as the Chairman of the Elderly Commission, how would you exert your influence to help better the living quality of our elderly?

Prof. Chan: Remember the good old days when neighbours willingly helped each other? It's a pity that many value privacy over friendship and the interaction within our communities are scarce to be found. The integrity is weak.

We need to provide community care to elderly through relationship and friendship, not solely through material assistance which is already provided by the Community Care Fund.

Such a target requires the collaboration amongst various governmental departments. It is not



the responsibility born only by the Social Welfare Department.

For example, designing public areas within public estates can be a starting point for creating a gathering place for residents which can encourage more communication and interaction. This would involve the Housing Authority.

Working in the Government consultancy

Tony Lai: Many are skeptical of the advisory nature of the Elderly Commission, that your suggestions do not have any regulatory power.

Then, by all means, how can your Commission make impact on government's policy?

And within which, how many suggestions have been taken by the authority and were then turned into solid actions?

Facing such systematical deficiency, have you ever felt frustrated and would like to leave your post?

Prof. Chan: I have just been appointed as Chairman and I would have to wait to see if I am to be overwhelmed by frustration. Nevertheless, I must admit that the Elderly Commission is only an advisory organization that our suggestions do not have bounding power.

Yet I can learn from the experience of the Commission's ex-chairman Dr. Leong Che-hung, which is to do concrete works and give feasible suggestions.

By advocating to the Government the needs of the elderly in Hong Kong and making achievable and understandable proposals, we hope that such suggestions can be adopted by the policy makers.

We should not be hasty, or to resolve in empty talks of impossible ideals. Rather, the Elderly Commission focuses on solid practices such as the founding of Elder Academy as well as the launching of the Neighbourhood Active Ageing Project, so as to sow the seed to a harmonious society for the elderly.

For instance, we have successfully prevented some tragedies related to hidden elderly through the Neighbourhood Project.

Our role is to bridge and coordinate between the government and the community. Not only can we facilitate the implementation of policies, but also to convey the voices from the community to the authority.

The Policy Address 2011 is a great surprise and encouragement to the Elderly Commission as the Chief Executive has adopted all of our suggestions, such as the "subsidies go with the elderly" concept. We even received a concessionary fares scheme as a bonus!

Universal Retirement Protection needs universal understanding

Tony Lai: You suggested grounded and solid works meeting the needs of the public should be encouraged, yet there are voices from the communities urging for a universal retirement protection scheme, in addition to the fact that you have previously agreed on the need to reinforce the supports of retirement for the elderly, do you still think that such a scheme is an impossible dream too far to reach?

Prof. Chan: I think it is a game of figures, to see whether the income can outweigh the expenditure incurred by the so called universal retirement protection scheme.

Broadly speaking, the Higher Old Age Allowance with a sum of HKD 1035 which is eligible to all older residents of age over 70 can be regarded as a universal social security system for the retired. The discussion now lies on whether the allowance is enough for the elderly.

If you take the figure from the universal retirement protection scheme supporter to allow every elderly regardless of their wealth to have HKD 3000 per month, and we take the current situation into reference that we have around 1 million elderly eligible to the money, then we are talking about HKD 3 billion per month, which is 36 billion dollars per year.

It is not about whether we can afford such a great sum at present, but we have to take into consideration whether we can afford it in the future as the number of elderly is estimated to double in 15 years.

The working population shrinks, which means tax income drops. We have only 3 more years before 2015 our population bonus will be exhausted. Facing such a considerably huge sum of running expenses, the actuaries will fail to keep the budget balanced.

It can be done by raising tax rates, which means taking money from the pockets of yours and mine.

Of course I welcome such implementation as I will soon be amongst one of the many beneficiaries.

How about the next generation? Are they willing to share the burden? This proposal needs universal consent and thorough consideration.

Towards a road of ageing

Tony Lai: Next I would like to know more about you personally, and also about your career in APIAS.

You have worked in the field of gerontology or related disciplines for over 30 years. Reviewing your past, what have driven you to pursue a career in gerontology when you have plenty of other choices?

Prof. Chan: I was first trained as a social worker in the UK while my clients were teenagers experiencing drug abuses or family problems.

However, the youngsters only listen to you when they made mistakes and they don't need you anymore when they have their problems dealt with.

It's the same for those who've got family problems. The clients would not want to have any entanglement with you after their matters are solved.

I wouldn't take it as an offense or blame them for their forgetfulness, as they knew me when they were at the darkest moment in their lifetime and my presence only recalled their painful memories...nonetheless, I didn't quite like the feeling of this situation.

It was only when I reached Edinburgh that I started serving elderly, which had proved to be a more touching experience than working with teenagers.

When you helped the elderly, they will remember your help and kindness for life. Many of the senior citizens in the UK treated me as one of their family members, that they often shared with me their delicacies as well as their feelings.

It is the warmth I felt from the senior citizens which has attracted me to elderly services.

When I returned to Hong Kong in the 80s, I taught in the Department of Social Work in the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

As you know, there are various specialties within the social science discipline, including women problems, juvenile problems or so. Yet the ageing phenomenon was not apparent in Hong Kong back then, so elderly service had not been attached with much importance and was even regarded as a profession of a lesser class.

But my working experience in the UK equipped me with the foresight that Hong Kong would also be challenged by the ageing population, that I decided to work for other elderly service providers and to accumulate more field experiences.



2 years later I taught in City University of Hong Kong and had been invited into the Elderly Commission and have served there since.

Treasures from the aged

Tony Lai: Within 30 years of your careers, do you have any unforgettable experiences or interesting thoughts?

Prof. Chan: I have an observation that elderly usually take death lightly. Younger people will be afraid of touching the taboo of death in front of older people, but the elderly see death as an inevitable stage of one's life-course and don't mind talking about it.

The elderly treasure greatly the development of the youth. Taking the Tiananmen Crackdown in 4 June 1989 as an example, that most of the older citizens set aside the politics but mourned the loss of young lives.

As for myself, I had also faced ageing problems within my family. My late father suffered from dementia and was taken care of by my younger sisters.

Yet, like many patients suffering from dementia, my father had caused a great fuss to my family members because of his forgetfulness and even hallucination.

I was lucky to have been able to apply of what I've learnt in my profession and had successfully taught my sisters how to skillfully deal with dementia patients. They got along very well afterwards.

This personal experience has motivated me to work harder in hope to better the retirement environment in Hong Kong while being more demanding to the quality and effectiveness of elderly policies.

Prof. Chan and APIAS

Tony Lai: So why APIAS was founded and why you have chosen to get involved?

Prof. Chan: Our former President of Lingnan University Prof. Edward Chen Kwan-yiu had anticipated the challenges brought to Hong Kong by the ageing population and establishing a research unit with a regional focus in Asia-Pacific was of interest to the development of gerontology within the University.

The Institute was set up with the mission to investigate the ageing process, and review the ageing policy in Hong Kong, as well as to prepare the younger generation for the ageing society. With my years of experience in the field of gerontology, I am confident to lead APIAS to a higher standard in research, course development and consultation.

APIAS's direction of development is parallel to the needs of our citizens. As mentioned before, there cannot be too big a difference between the people's demands and the feasibility of the Government. We cannot present unachievable suggestions.

Tony Lai: How would you comment on the achievement of both yourself and APIAS?

Prof. Chan: Compared to other tertiary institutes, it is obvious that Lingnan University has been comparatively disadvantaged in terms of resources, yet APIAS can still become the leading and renowned research unit both locally and internationally.

Being able to cooperate with international brands such as United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) and World Health Organization (WHO), it is very encouraging and is an affirmation to the efforts we have made so far. But be reminded that such a great achievement does not belong solely to me, but to all staff in APIAS as a team, and also to all of our friends who have helped us in our research.

The Launching of APIAS Newsletter

Tony Lai: What would you expect from the launching of APIAS Newsletter?

Prof. Chan: Firstly, I would like to provide our readers, especially elderly readers, with the latest news and development of gerontological issues within the Asia-Pacific region, such as medical technology and policy advancement.

Also I would like our audience to have a better understanding of APIAS' solid contributions in helping to create a society for all ages.

Furthermore, the newsletter would serve as a platform for promoting interactions and exchanges amongst tertiary institutes.

As gerontology is an interdisciplinary subject, it is essential for different parties to communicate and share their knowledge and opinions in the construction of a better retirement environment.

Tony Lai: Thank you very much for your valuable time.

Prof. Chan: You're welcome.

