



# a journey with

# Li Ka-shing

*His many charitable and community activities are very dear to Li Ka-shing's heart*

*By Arthur York*



FEW MEMORIES ARE AS VIVID. Though a year has passed, the experience and the emotions are as true today as they were that rainy afternoon in China. Perhaps they are even more poignant now, with time, as they are placed beside a handful of similar experiences that have taken place since, so genuine and consistent that they cut to the heart of a trained journalist – a heart conditioned to be sceptical.

For most Americans, Li Ka-shing is something of an enigma. Unlike Gates, Buffet and Branson – businessmen whose exploits are detailed on the nightly news and whose strategies find their way into bestselling books – Mr Li lives a quiet life, despite the global reach of his empire. And in so doing he opens the door to speculation and even a bit of mystery.

Long before we met, he had been described to me as the inspiration for the tycoon antagonist to Agent 007, a man whose

wealth and power could threaten not only nations, but the world.

Then he invited me in. It began with breakfast and a smile. I was taken by how attentive he was to those around him. His voice was gentle, and he was as gracious with staff as he was with visitors. As we sat in the upper offices of the Cheung Kong Center, grey clouds rolling against the windows, I was taken by his warmth and reminded of a scene I had read in a book about Tolstoy. The passage was written by his secretary who had taken ill and was overcome when Tolstoy began to take care of him: “As he left the room to get my tea, I savoured the unreality, the touching absurdity, of my situation. Here was the greatest author of the West, Leo Tolstoy, fetching tea for me, his new secretary, nearly sixty years his junior. This was a man I could easily love. Indeed, as I lay there on my back, surveying the crumbling plaster on the ceiling, I loved him already.”



and moving with purpose, he still took time to recognise people he did not know and would never see again.

The storm, still a day or two off, did not deter the Chairman, nor did it dampen the spirits of 3,000 students who were graduating from Shantou University, a campus Li Ka-shing had envisaged and built in the green hills of Guangdong Province. Since its inception, some 30,000 students have graduated from Shantou University. More than US\$250 million has been donated to the University since its beginning in 1981. And some 1,500 new students are enrolled each year.

The philanthropist was scheduled to speak to the graduating class, and as our bus rolled onto campus I was surprised to see the lane leading to the administration building lined with stu-



*Above from left to right: one of the many medical facilities supported by Mr Li in China; Mr Li receives the Legion of Honour from French President Jacques Chirac at the Elysee Palace; Shantou University in Guangdong, China.*

Despite more than two decades as a journalist – or perhaps because of those two decades – I am touched by the kindness of a powerful man. I am also a student of emotions, remaining cynical enough to question even the best behaviour to determine its motive.

Though the answer began to unfold the first morning I met Mr Li, it was confirmed many months later, on that rainy afternoon in China.

Li Ka-shing and I had left Hong Kong for Shantou. Somewhere in the South China Sea a typhoon was gathering. I was taken aback as we walked through the airport, that Mr Li carried his own suitcase. His personality was buoyant in the early hour, and on more than one occasion a cleaner, upon recognising Mr Li, stopped mid activity to watch him pass. Each time he smiled and acknowledged the cleaner. Energetic

students – cheering, pressing forward. Mr Li's expression was the definition of joy, his smile broad as he waved out the window and stepped from the bus to a blizzard of flashing cameras.

Authorities wanted to move Li Ka-shing inside the building. The growing crowd made them nervous. But he would not move. His desire was to be with the students. Several brought him flowers. Others reached to shake hands and even embrace. He focused on each one and posed for photographs, and I watched the authorities grow increasingly anxious as the mass swelled into an uncontrollable crowd – a riot of goodwill. Still Mr Li would not leave. A member of the school administration leaned toward me and said, "There are thousands more who wanted to be here. We had to limit the number."

The campus is clean and modern, 1.26 square kilometres designed with the eye of an artist. In its short but impressive history, it has established colleges in arts, sciences, engineering, design, medicine, law and business. It has 38 graduate programmes and four post-graduate programmes. All made possible by Li Ka-shing.

It is clear that Mr Li is no absentee benefactor. Rather, he is involved personally, enthusiastically, offering guidance and motivation to those on the front lines. With excitement he shows me artist renderings for the library that will soon be

built on campus. He is as proud as the architect of the inspiring confluence of ancient and modern design. I witness the same enthusiasm with other projects, taking time to visit the medical school he has endowed, two of five hospitals he has sponsored, along with a state-of-the-art medical centre focusing on eye care. And this is just the beginning.

A programme he supports to provide medical relief to the poor sends physicians and medical supplies into remote villages and rural areas of China. In 1998, he established the National Hospice Care Programme, the first of its kind, to serve cancer patients through a network of 20 major hospitals and in-home patient care. In a single year more than 20,000 house calls are made by physicians sponsored by Mr Li, and tens of thousands receive health care, including pain relief therapy for those who are terminally ill.

**L**I KA-SHING'S giving is not limited to Hong Kong and China. He has sponsored children's centres, church buildings, cancer research centres, and scholarships in the United Kingdom, medical research projects in the United States, and perhaps the largest charitable organisation in the history of Canada. He has provided millions of dollars internationally in the fight against hepatitis, Avian Flu and degenerative diseases. In addition to Shantou University, major educational projects include Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the Open University of Hong Kong, Singapore Management University, Foundation Primary Schools, University of Calgary and the University of Hong Kong, to name only a few.

Nor is Mr Li's philanthropy limited to health care and education. He is one of the world's great patrons of culture – art, dance, music, literature, sports and the preservation of artifacts – as well as community welfare, including disaster relief. Following the horrors of the tsunami in South Asia, Li Ka-shing was among the first to make a sizeable contribution to help families of the victims, to provide relief for the survivors, and to rebuild. Likewise, following earthquakes in India and China.

How much does Li Ka-shing spend on the countless projects that benefit from his giving? To go into detail would be suffocating. Let it suffice to say that this year alone he has given away more than US\$1 billion to his private foundations, establishing him as one of the world's most generous philanthropists. Earnest and unassuming, Mr Li clearly considers his philanthropy as a blessing. He takes joy in giving, though he is reluctant to talk about it in terms other than what those around him are doing. Just as he instinctively quickens his pace to hold open a door for others, his focus is well beyond himself, without aggrandisement, or desire for fanfare.

Yet his reputation spreads. Seven months after travelling to Shantou, I was with Li Ka-shing again in Paris. It was January, and he had been invited by President Jacques Chirac

to the Elysee Palace. "Your profound generosity is unanimously recognised," President Chirac said, bestowing upon Mr Li the Insignia of Commander of the Legion of Honour – a recognition that began with Napoleon and remains the highest honour given by France to non-citizens.

It was fitting that Li Ka-shing was honoured in the kind of

## *"Before Honour is Humility"*

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*



opulence that few do as well as the French, and Chirac offered insight into what I believe motivates Mr Li's generosity. "Your father's influence on you has been key to the build-up of your personality," Chirac said. "You have been well known for your humanity, simplicity and generosity." He spoke of Mr Li's boyhood, arriving destitute in Hong Kong and needing to take care of his family when his father died from tuberculosis. Li Ka-shing was only 12 when he was forced to leave school to work in a factory. And as Chirac spoke, my mind returned to Shantou, to Mr Li with his students. I suddenly understood. Robbed of the opportunity to study himself, Li Ka-shing is driven to ensure the opportunity for others. The hours he worked on the factory floor, manufacturing plastic, moulded his spirit as well, filling him with empathy for the cleaners in the airport.

"Your story portrayed the journey of a man of goodwill and hard work, the journey of a man of heart and a great deal of courage," Chirac continued, and I was struck that Mr Li is different, he is genuine and thoughtful, because in his life he found purpose before he found wealth. He knew who he was long before he became what he is. And what he is he earned. He makes the cleaners, the students surrounding him at Shantou, and everyone he meets feel important because he remembers how it was to feel otherwise.

As Chirac reviewed Mr Li's exceptional career and life, I

found myself less an objective observer and more an admiring student. And there is much to learn. As Chirac spoke, I considered that Mr Li has built a global empire. He has been acknowledged as the Entrepreneur of the Millennium. He has, in the words of Chirac, “built his success and then fed it back to the community.” But I realise that all of these accomplishments are not the true measure of Li Ka-shing.

Kipling wrote that the mark of a man is his ability to walk with kings without losing the common touch. It is an ideal, and over the years I have watched many try to attain it, only to

honour? We all want to have wealth. But do you know the true value of wealth? We know passion. But do we know love?

“You are the only one who knows how you are going to live your life. The knowledge you have gained here will bring you opportunities; but it will not tell you how to live. Only you can change your knowledge into wisdom.

“My dear students, ‘Are you ready?’”

When he finishes, the auditorium erupts in applause and he steps from the stage. Again, students and their parents press forward to shake his hand. Trustees and university administrators



come off as patronising or feigning in their words and deeds. On the other hand, witnessing the ideal in a moment – stark and true – is an experience never to be forgotten. And so it endures.

“This must be a very exciting moment for you,” Mr Li tells the Shantou graduating class. “You have studied hard and completed an important stage in life. You are moving on, and I have felt your joy being with you on campus these few nights.”

Hundreds of students have rushed to the front of the auditorium to capture his photograph. There is no pretence to the man. And it is clear that the students – who can sniff out hypocrisy at a hundred paces – find no guile in him. When he offers them insights, it is as if they are receiving scripture.

“Whenever you turn a new leaf in life, when you dream a new dream – foster new hopes – it is always time to ponder, and to ask yourself, ‘Are you ready?’ , ‘Do you have what it takes?’ When you dream of success, are you ready for endurance?” Students continue to take his photograph. “You are ambitious to lead. But are you ready to serve? We all want to get. Do we know how to give? We all want to stand out. But do we know how to be supportive? You want to change others. Would you change for them? We all want to have courage. But do we know

**From left to right: Mr Li visits patients in a facility he funds in Guangdong; graduating students at Shantou University express their gratitude to Mr Li; emergency food supplies provided by the Li Ka Shing Foundation.**

follow him as he walks slowly up the aisle, taking time to greet as many as possible. I take my place at the end of the procession and am surprised as we emerge from the building into a thunderstorm. The leading edge of the typhoon has made land. The

sky is dark. The rain hard. And a car is waiting to take Mr Li to the airport. I look to the car, assuming that Mr Li is already inside. Then I see that students and parents have followed him into the plaza. He is nowhere near the car, but among the crowd.

Camera flashes mingle with lightning. Students and parents swarm around him. He poses for photographs, enthusiastically shakes hands and embraces people who only moments ago were strangers. As I watch from the steps above the plaza, it feels as if time is standing still. Trustees and administrators try to direct Mr Li toward the car, but just as he would not leave the students two days earlier when we arrived, he will not leave them now – not before he has had the opportunity to meet everyone who wants to meet him. Even in the rain and roaring thunder, he is undeterred, and as I stand, inspired by his example, I am grateful for the rain, as it masks not only my tears, but those in the eyes of so many others. And I feel myself being changed, honoured to see what true wealth is and how it only becomes true wealth when it is given away, with nothing expected in return.

