

Dr Lee Nai-shee Harry

Honorary Fellow

Citation



In 1947 Hong Kong's first textile mill began spinning its yarn, set up almost by accident when its founder, Shanghai textile trader C.C. Lee, was unable to secure an import licence to ship American-made spinning machinery from its transit point in Hong Kong on to his home city.

This was the birth of South China Textiles Limited, and an industry that went on to become one of the drivers of Hong Kong's economic growth after the Second World War. Mr Lee quickly expanded the company and in 1954 opened his first garment factory before incorporating a Jardine finishing plant to create Textile Alliance Limited (TAL) in 1962.

The group, still owned by the Lee family, has weathered many a storm in the decades since – the boom and bust years of the 1970s, the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s, SARS in 2003, and the global financial crash of 2008. But none of that stopped it adapting and growing to become one of the world's largest multinational garment producers, headquartered in Hong Kong but with 9 garment factories across East Asia and one in Ethiopia; more than 20,000 employees worldwide; and an annual capacity of 53 million garment pieces a year. The chances are many of us here today are likely to be wearing a TAL-crafted garment. Indeed, the group is said to make one in six dress shirts sold in the US.

TAL is thus one of the great made in/made by Hong Kong success stories, thanks to the Lees - first C.C. and, for the last 50 years, his nephew, today's honorand Dr Lee Nai-shee Harry. Dr Lee is chairman of both TAL Group and Tradelink Electronic Commerce Limited, which he and TAL part own as an electronic platform for import-export administration and declarations.

Dr Lee stands out, both as a champion of innovation for Hong Kong's textile and garment industry, and for his deep commitment to education and skills development. He is also a guiding hand in our own community, as chairperson of the Committee of Overseers of Lee Woo Sing College, and an honorary fellow of the college.

When he was appointed to head the garment division of TAL in 1979, he was just one of two graduates in the operation. Over the decades he upgraded the systems, technology, and professional knowhow. His spirit of innovation enabled the company to be the first to commercially produce iron-free 100% cotton shirts, with a finishing

formula discovered by chance, and garments with perfect, pucker-free seams - puckering had been a long standing problem for the industry. He also steered TAL in the development of sophisticated forecasting and inventory control for its customers, which now enables on-time delivery direct to their retail outlets, with 99 per cent time accuracy.

He has also done much to secure the quality reputation now associated with garments that are 'made by Hong Kong', if no longer 'in'. From 2010 to 2018 he was chairman of the Hong Kong Research Institute of Textiles & Apparel Ltd (HKRITA) and is now its advisor and chairman emeritus. The institute, founded in 2006 and funded by the Innovation and Technology Commission of the Hong Kong government, supports the continued innovation and drive for sustainability in the sector and is well supported by the industry for Hong Kong-led enterprises to compete globally and contribute to the economy of Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area. He has represented the sector through his long association with the Textile Council of Hong Kong Ltd. and

the Hong Kong Garment Manufacturer's Association, and is now honorary chairman of both.

He has further shared his industry experience with education, as a member of the Industrial Advisory Committee of the Research Institute for Intelligent Wearable Systems at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and, until last year, as governor of the Vocational Training Council's THEi and a board member of the VTC.

Dr Lee had the good fortune to be born into a family that recognised the importance of education, long before it was universally available or expected in Hong Kong. He was born in Shanghai, where his father owned a small bank. At the age of eight he moved with his parents to Hong Kong – his father supporting his uncle on the finance side of his nascent textiles enterprise. He attended Wah Yan College, Hong Kong, before completing his schooling and undergraduate education in the United Kingdom. He holds a bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering from Imperial College London, and a Doctorate in materials science from Brown

University in the US, where he met his wife Victoria.

His dream was to work in research. He joined Bell Labs – an extraordinary place described by one of its former directors as 'an institute of creative technology' from which ten Nobel Prizes and five Turing awards have emerged – not to mention the transistor, the laser, and the photovoltaic cell among a slew of less widely known yet still extraordinarily important inventions. He went on to Exxon Corporation, to work on the development of methanol fuel cells. But in 1973 he was persuaded by his cousin Richard to join the family textiles and garments operation, first being thrown in at the deep end to manage TAL's factory in Malaysia that employed as many as 3,000 weavers and spinners before returning to head the garment division in Hong Kong. After the company was restructured and his uncle's retirement, he became managing director (a position later referred to as chief executive) in 1983.

His contributions to his industry and development of Hong Kong have been

widely recognised. He was appointed an Officer of the British Empire from the Queen in 1996, was appointed a Justice of Peace in 1997, and was awarded the Silver Bauhinia Star in 2001. In 2019 he was awarded the Honorary Fellowship of the Textile Institute in Manchester, UK. Equally important is the warm recognition and affection he is receiving from TAL employees, who this year are celebrating his 50 years at the heart of the company.

Dr Lee stepped back from day-to-day leadership of TAL in 2013, giving his son Roger free rein as the new chief executive. However, he continues to head the R and D team, and beyond TAL is working to produce innovative fabrics not for fashion but for use in healthcare. These have anti-microbial properties that can counter hospital acquired infections, bed sores and foot infections experienced by diabetics, for example.

Hong Kong and the textile and garment industry more widely have benefited hugely from the continuous appetite for innovation and public service of Dr Lee. It is thus my

great honour to present Dr Lee Nai-shee Harry for an Honorary Fellowship of the University.

Citation is presented by Professor Nick Rawlins, Pro-Vice-Chancellor / Vice-President (Student Experience) and Master of Morningside College