

Professor Ching Pak-chung

Honorary Fellow Citation



The history of this University is vividly evident through the space of its campus. Two decades ago, Professor Ching Pak-chung (P.C.) was already a key figure in two places in the University: the Faculty of Engineering and Shaw College. Today, it is no exaggeration to say that our transformed campus has been shaped by Professor Ching in such a way that every moment we walk through a world bearing his dynamic and imaginative stamp.

For someone who has so profoundly influenced not only a Faculty and a College, but also the whole University, as well as the development of CUHK-Shenzhen, it bears a moment's thought to consider that Professor Ching did not in fact go directly from school to university. Instead he studied through practice, going out into the workforce with a position at Cable and Wireless. The British-based company was then a monopoly telecommunications supplier, and typified the city's transition from manufacturing to the service economy we see today.

At that transitional moment, the young P.C. became a trainee technician, and was pitched in to the whole range of activities in which the company engaged. Spending a few months at Kai Tak Airport, he became entranced by air traffic control and radar as they enabled the notorious experience of landing at the old airport. Visiting Stanley Point, familiarising himself with the city's first satellite receiver dishes at Earth Station, Professor Ching became fascinated by the possibilities of long-haul communication. For him, engineering was a part of the city's lived fabric before it was a course of studies.

Recommended to consider university study by an engineer from the north of England, Professor Ching studied

engineering at the University of Liverpool, receiving the highest honours and going on to study a PhD. Once again, however, there was a moment of “what might have been”, as he nearly took a job in England’s “Silicon Corridor” on graduating with his B.Eng. Fortunately, inspired by a teacher who himself wanted to learn more about signal processing, Professor Ching got to work imagining uses for technologies on which we all rely today. To stay at the University of Liverpool, it no doubt helped that his favourite sport is football, and then as now it was a great time to be a Liverpool FC fan.

The essential problems on which Professor Ching has worked relate to data compression in digital signal processing, important especially for speech. His work has focused on enabling speech for everyone, allowing us all to speak, hear, and communicate better. Far from his own family, he could understand the burgeoning appetite for technologies that enhanced communication-at-a-distance. At the same time, Professor Ching was influenced by new perspectives from living in a different culture, working to his own schedule, and developing his independence.

Professor Ching's teaching and research cover communication systems. Today, he is Director of the Shun Hing Institute of Advanced Engineering. He researches spoken

language processing, including work on the recognition of emotion in speech, and the capacity to analyse the Cantonese-English code-mixing that is so distinctive of the city. In our “AI moment” it is also worth understanding that Professor Ching's research, involving for example neural networks and machine learning, has played a part in innovations that to us may seem to have sprung out of nowhere.

Much of this work has taken place in the Faculty of Engineering at the Chinese University, where he served as both a department chair and also Dean of the Faculty. Professor Ching has been an active member of the University for more than four decades, and from the 1980s he has been part of its growth into a powerhouse of research as well as teaching. In his work, the two will always be intertwined. There is nothing like spending weeks working with your graduate students to soundproof a research lab. Such experiences produce the close relationships on which a university truly depends.

Such relationships are also evident in Professor Ching's long association with Shaw College, where he was a warden for fifteen years, before becoming College Head. At a time when it was the newest college, Shaw had an independent and highly participatory spirit, no doubt shaped in part by Professor

Ching's entrepreneurial drive. This drive also informed his role in CUHK-Shenzhen, first as Director of the CUHK-Shenzhen Research Institute, and later serving on the governing body of the CUHK-Shenzhen campus. Professor Ching had a longstanding sense that engaging society means engaging the city's natural partners in the Greater Bay Area.

Such deep connections with College and University remind us that we are fortunate that Professor Ching did not pursue his passions outside formal education. In fact, his early entry into the workforce shaped his approach to taking on roles in the University, and also shaped his understanding of its role in society. Today professors think about how their research can make an impact on the world, and lead to real societal change. Professor Ching has always had a keen belief that university research cannot be cut off from the outside world. He was a key driver in developing the University's outward-looking capacity to pitch projects and coordinate resources that make a real difference to people's lives.

This grasp of the University's role reflects Professor Ching's own personal qualities. His year working for Cable and Wireless, involved with different tasks, fostered his ability to take on diverse projects for the University. At a time when momentous changes were underway in

the educational landscape of Hong Kong, with the shift to the four year curriculum, Professor Ching became Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Vice-President with a very broad portfolio indeed. During his appointment, he was responsible for the Campus Master Plan, the development of new colleges, revamping the Hong Kong Internet Exchange and the Information Technology Services Centre, and also promoting technology transfer.

The explanation for this wide range of responsibilities was that they were all “engineering problems” in the broadest sense, and so there could be no better guide than such an eminent engineer. The whole Chinese University community today can attest to Professor Ching's ability to make sure that, in so many different domains, form follows function. Every day we unthinkingly depend on his ingenuity in designing systems that truly work for their users.

Professor Ching's ability to address just about any problem is also reflected in the range of service he has done for the city. His community work is united by an emphasis on “quality assurance”, whether as Founding Chair of the Hong Kong Council for Testing and Certification, chairing the city's Veterinary Surgeons Board and the Nano and Advanced Materials Institute (NAMI), working on the Museum Advisory Committee, or serving

as President of the Hong Kong Academy of Engineering Sciences or a panel member for the Research Grants Committee. In recognition of his community work, Professor Ching has been awarded the Bronze and Silver Bauhinia Stars.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong and the city as a whole have benefited immensely from the boundless energy for innovation and service shown by Professor Ching Pak-chung. It is accordingly my great honour to present Professor Ching for an Honorary Fellowship of the University.

Citation is written by Professor David Huddart, Chair of the Department of English and Director of the Research Institute for the Humanities
