

Honorary Doctor of Letters

Mr CHOW Yun-fat

Citation written and delivered by Mr CHAN Che-shing

Chairman:

Please allow me to begin with the following story.

There was once a happy, innocent little boy who was born in a remote fishing village. Little did one know that when he grew up, he would become a superstar whose name is known all over the world.

This little boy was not interested in school, had little learning, and lived from hand to mouth by hawking goods on the streets. Who would have imagined that, through hard work and diligence, he would eventually become a role model for scores of fans?

This is not fiction, nor is it the plot of a film. It is the true story of a real person — a television and film star familiar to us all — the story of Mr Chow Yun-fat.

Mr Chow Yun-fat was born in a remote fishing village in 1955 on Lamma Island, in Hong Kong. He came from a poor family; his seaman father passed away when he was very young, so his mother had to shoulder the heavy burden of providing for the family's livelihood. Aside from attending school, Mr Chow had to find a way to help support the family: he sold herbal jelly in the summer and Hakka tea-pudding in the winter. Lamma Island was then sparsely populated, and he had to follow his mother up and down the hills, hawking foodstuffs for a living. This way they barely managed a hand-to-mouth existence. Given the circumstances, it was understandable that he could not focus on his studies, and sometimes even played truant. Moreover, the economic conditions in Hong Kong were still rather poor in those days; the economy was at an early stage of development and far from taking off. So despite his mother's persistent encouragement, Mr Chow only completed Form Three and then started making his own living.

It was not at all easy to make a living in Hong Kong in the 1960s. Mr Chow worked in many jobs, as an electronics factory worker, office assistant, postal

worker and hotel waiter. His lucky break came when he turned 18 and, using his talents, was accepted in an actors' training course at Television Broadcasting Limited. This was the start of his career as an actor: it was a turning point in his life.

It was only when he enrolled in the actors' training course and participated in actual performances that he realized the mistake he had made in skipping classes in his school days. As he had not completed his education, he often had to ask for help when he tried to learn his scripts. This made Mr Chow understand fully the importance of knowledge. "Understanding the blunders one made in the past, thus realising what one has to catch up with in the future" — since then, he has worked hard to improve himself by continuously learning and asking for advice and help. He firmly believes that "one must not feel ashamed in asking for help"; by doing that, one can "seek advice from many different teachers".

This belief has gone beyond simply asking others for the correct pronunciation of Chinese words in scripts. He has extended it to the sharpening of his acting skills, refinement of his temperament, as well as improving his capacity to deal with others. He has adhered to this personal belief all his life, and has reaped endless benefits from it.

Mr Chow has starred in many TV series: among them, *Hotel*, *The Giants*, *Conflict*, *The Bund*, *The Legend of Master So*, as well as *The Smiling Proud Wanderer* were particularly well received and won the admiration of many. The popularity of television means that many families watch it, and on top of this, with his versatility, Mr Chow was cast in a variety of roles and captured the hearts of both the young and the old. As a result, "Chow Yun-fat" quickly became a household name in Southeast Asian countries, and he was recognized by Chinese communities worldwide.

His success in television drama helped launch him into the film industry. He has won numerous awards for his outstanding performances. Among the over 70 films he has made, he won Best Actor Awards for his roles in *Hong Kong 1941*, *An Autumn's Tale*, *A Better Tomorrow*, *City on Fire*, and *All about Ah Long*. In fact he often received awards from different organizations for the same films.

Excellent acting and numerous awards do not of course always guarantee box-office success. Mr Chow's acting career was not all smooth sailing. There were times when his career was in the doldrums — he was once even labelled "box-office

poison”. People who are not strong-willed may not be able to face up to challenges and may soon become depressed and demoralized. However, Mr Chow never gave in. Instead he tried relentlessly to find out the reasons for the box-office failures, and further honed his acting skills. When he later teamed up with some distinguished directors and had the opportunity to star in such highly acclaimed productions as *The Story of Woo-Viet*, *An Autumn’s Tale*, *A Better Tomorrow* and *Peace Hotel*, the way was paved for his Hollywood debut.

To Mr Chow, going to Hollywood meant not only a new working environment and a different performing arts system. It also presented a great difficulty: his standard of English. It was a huge challenge for him. Fortunately he believes that the greater the difficulty, the harder one should try to overcome it. With persistence, patience, humility, determination, as well as the belief that one should not feel ashamed in asking for help, he has managed a breakthrough. Although a language coach was assigned to help him with the English required for every film, Mr Chow understands that knowing the pronunciation does not suffice. He also has to be able to read between the lines and use body language to interpret particular characters. Mr Chow knows clearly that to be a successful actor entails much more than simply speaking good English.

He learned to speak English in English-speaking productions, and Thai in Thai-speaking productions. He fully understands that the essence of language lies not in simply parroting speech and learning grammar. Specific characters require specific speech and specific mannerisms. It can be said that his language learning involves the elements of culture and life, and takes into consideration the personality of his characters and language settings.

Mr Chow has appeared in over 100 television drama series and films. While he was the leading man in most of these productions, he has played a large variety of roles including the good guy and the villain, in drama and action films, ranging from Hui Man-keung in *The Bund*, “Boat Head” in *An Autumn’s Tale*, and “Brother Mark” in *A Better Tomorrow*. In these legendary roles, his acting was both outstanding and creative, and he has taken it to greater heights since making his Hollywood debut in 1995. The recent award-winning production of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is the first time he has worked in a Qing martial-arts film. It won four Academy Awards, including Best Foreign Language Film and Mr Chow’s performance was highly praised. His success can be attributed to the hard work he

put in — in terms of studying meticulously and bringing different characters to life.

Apart from his film career, Mr Chow has also helped promote local industries and tourism in his role as Ambassador for Hong Kong. Earlier this year he was also appointed the first Hong Kong Philatelic Ambassador by Hongkong Post. And, in recognition of Mr Chow's success in the performing arts, the Mayor of Chicago in the United States designated 10th February 1990 and 12th January 1998 as "Chow Yun-fat Day". This is indeed an honour for a Hong Kong citizen, and reflects the international recognition of Mr Chow's acting accomplishments.

Mr Chow has the greatest filial respect for his mother, who is now over 80 and enjoys very good health. He remembers very well his mother's teaching and encouragement during the difficult days of his youth. Mr Chow recalls that although his mother could not read, she could recite classical Chinese texts and explain the morals therein to him, so that he could understand how best to lead his life and enrich his personal experience. To Mr Chow, his mother is someone always dear to his heart, the person he learns from, loves and respects most.

Apart from his mother, the other person who has influenced him most is his wife, Mrs Jasmine Chow, a lady with traditional Chinese virtues. Mr Chow was in his forties when he started his Hollywood career; if not for the encouragement and assistance of Mrs Chow, who is from Singapore, he would have found it extremely difficult to learn English. In addition to helping him with English, Mrs Chow also handles the administration work for her husband and supports him in developing his career. As the popular saying goes, "Behind every successful man, there is always a woman." Behind Mr Chow's success, there are two women. In the former half of his life, there was his mother; in the latter half, there is his wife. His mother raised him to be the person he is today, and his wife helps him to develop his career. These two ladies provide the motivation for him to work hard and play an important role in his success.

Mr Chow's achievements offer a good example to our young people and he is a role model for all of us. What we can learn from Mr Chow is: first, the importance of his life-long learning, improvement and innovation; second, how he continues to work hard despite frustrations and failures; third, how he treats others with humility and kindness, and is never ashamed to ask for help; fourth, how he maintains an upright character while working in the complicated environment of

the entertainment business; and fifth, how he always remembers his mother, never tries to hide his humble beginnings or forget his roots. These are good examples for all of us and are models for our young students as to how they should live and learn.

Mr Chairman, in recognition of Mr Chow Yun-fat's diligence and life-long learning, as well as his achievements in the performing arts and his significant contribution to Hong Kong, I now present to you Mr Chow for the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.