

Honorary Doctor of Letters

Ms Elizabeth WANG Ming-chun

Chinese citation written and delivered by Professor Benjamin T'SOU Ka-yin

Pro-Chancellor:

Hong Kong had been described as having been “a borrowed place on borrowed time” over the last century. That was to say, we, the people of Hong Kong, were all sojourners passing through here. But in fact it was not true. Hong Kong is rather a land of opportunity with great many blessings. It is full of immense possibilities. It can nurture and grow grass, flowers and trees. Be they native or non-native, they can all take roots and blossom here. Here in Hong Kong, any talented person, who is diligent and striving hard enough, will rise above challenges and produce remarkable results, blossoming in their chosen field, be it finance or manufacturing, or commerce or entertainment.

Take the spectacular success story of Ms Elizabeth Wang Ming-chun as an example. Born on Chongming Island of Shanghai, she migrated to Hong Kong at the age of only nine. Soon after she had mastered impeccable Cantonese, as well as Shanghai dialect and English, and she even learned Japanese. Many linguists are simply amazed by her outstanding linguistic talents.

Acting has been a passion for Ms Wang since her childhood. Fast forward more than four decades; in the 1960s she stood out among more than a thousand applicants contending for only nine actor trainee slots at Rediffusion Television. She won her place and her acting career began. Later on, she moved to TVB. And, in order to further improve her acting and performance levels, she paid her way to Japan for further studies. During this time she endured a life of hardship. Often she ate only Chinese steam buns or instant noodles to save money to watch shows and performances. With her strong determination, she learnt the Japanese art of dancing and singing and laid the foundations of success for her future career in performing arts.

After her return to Hong Kong from Japan, she dedicated herself to her performing career. For 40 years, she has relentlessly broken new ground in her performances. To date, she has already done more than 60 television drama series.

Many of the characters she created have become household names. She has played a lot of different and wildly popular roles, from a tender and docile young girl to the heroine with great strength of character and determination. Her extraordinary versatility has won her numerous awards and fans, which firmly established her unrivalled prestige as “the Big Sister” among all Hong Kong’s performing artists. Without doubt, Ms Wang is also an excellent TV variety show host and presenter. The TV variety shows she hosted or took part in have usually scored high viewing rates. Her graceful and noble personality combined with her articulate and poised presentation was a real hit. She then came to be regarded by TVB as its mainstay.

Not satisfied with only success in TV acting and hosting, in 1969 she went on to film acting, pop singing and stage drama. She has featured in many films, produced 40 solo albums and has become a familiar pop icon ever since. Her songs can convey tender affection as in *Love and Passion* or burning patriotism as in *The Brave Chinese*. Such songs have become popular among the Chinese diaspora around the world and we can hear her songs and watch her TV series shown wherever there are Chinese people. She has held many successful solo concerts, even together with the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra. She has reinterpreted Chinese folk songs, pop songs, and Chinese opera in a refreshing new style. In the 1980s, she took on stage drama. The stage platform brought face-to-face contact with the audience and raised stage drama to new heights. The success of her stage dramas also became legendary.

In 1984, as her career soared, Ms Wang was invited to join the 108-member delegation from Hong Kong to witness the historic signing ceremony of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong held at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. She was the only representative from Hong Kong’s performing arts community. The historic occasion in turn led her into politics. She was appointed a Hong Kong/Macau Delegate of the 7th and 8th National People’s Congress from 1988–1997. She has been a member of the National Committee of Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference since 1998. Being involved in China’s national affairs for the past 20 years, she has learnt much about the political process, from learning to read legislative documents to examining legislation, and she was a good representative of the entertainment sector. With remarkable political sensitivities to her credit, she has become a rare success story amongst the Hong Kong entertainers entering politics.

At the peak of Ms Wang's performing career, her albums, films and TV series were confronted by restrictions from the Taiwan Government because of her political activities. Undaunted by such adversity, she saw it as a new opportunity to turn to Cantonese opera, and expanded her already extensive performing career. In 1983 she formed a Cantonese opera troupe, the "Full House Cantonese Opera Troupe", with her own money. In 1988, together with Mr Law Kar-ying, she formed the "Boombabliss Cantonese Opera Troupe" and staged many new performances, and for each one, they created a specific new script accordingly. She also introduced many new innovative elements, making each performance a breakthrough.

Over the past 20 years, more than 30 such operas have been staged. In 1992, she became the chairwoman of the Chinese Artist Association of Hong Kong, the first female to hold the post in more than half a century of its history. Under her leadership, the association spared no effort in nurturing new blood, fighting for government sponsorship and improving their performance. Thus, she has brought into Hong Kong's Cantonese opera community a breath of fresh air. In July 2007 she was re-elected the chairwoman. Thanks to her relentless efforts, the Sunbeam Theatre has been saved from the demolitionist and continues as Hong Kong's only regular venue for Cantonese opera performance.

Cantonese opera has combined the culture of Central China with that of the South, such as *Nanyin* or Southern Music, and the elegance of its lyrics is legendary. Artistically speaking, it is a school of its own. With Cantonese opera threatened by globalisation, Ms Wang's tireless efforts in promoting it as a local culture and tradition worthy of preservation are of enormous historical significance to Hong Kong.

Being a thyroid then breast cancer survivor, Ms Wang decided to become an executive member of the Hong Kong Anti-Cancer Society. She also took part in various philanthropic shows and activities to promote the society. Her public services included serving as a consultative member in many of the government consultative committees, as director of Po Leung Kuk Board and member of the Pok Oi Hospital Board of Directors and as a committee member of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council from 1996 to 1997. In 1981 she was elected as one of the Ten Outstanding Young Persons of Hong Kong. From 2003 to 2005 she served as a member of the Hong Kong Dance Company's board. In 2004 she was awarded the Silver Bauhinia Star by the Hong Kong SAR Government. In 2005

she was awarded the RTHK Golden Needle Award. And in 2007, she was awarded the Montblanc de la Culture Arts Patronage Award.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Miss Wang's performing career. She has remained the essence of what master Kwan Tak-hing praised as "an iron woman", forever young in her role as a performing artist and never giving up. She has singled out her favourite song lyrics from the *Song of Tea-picking*: "When a flower blossoms, its scent drifts afar. After the battering rain and gushing wind, the tea tree grows even stronger." She likes it because the camellia symbolises her determination, representing loyalty, modesty, elegance and noble ideals. Perhaps a more suitable comparison would be with the premier Chinese peony flower, not only graceful and majestic but also the *creme de la creme* in Hong Kong's flower garden. She is indeed a dynamic driving force for Hong Kong's performing industry and a role model for younger artists. She embodies the spirit of persistence, diligence and enterprise, which represent the true character of Hong Kong people.

Mr Pro-Chancellor, may I now ask you to confer the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, to Ms Elizabeth Wang Ming-chun, for her outstanding contributions to society and the world of performing arts in Hong Kong.