

# IN FULL FLOW

*He named his first company after a great river. Fifty years on, Li Ka-shing's cup runneth over.*  
By Mark Caldwell



Early in June a modest, bespectacled figure approached the podium at a gala dinner in Winnipeg, Canada, to accept the University of Manitoba's International Distinguished Entrepreneur Award, an accolade that recognises individuals who have made a substantial contribution to society and the economy. "I am Li Ka-shing," he said simply as he began to address the audience. But the man needed no introduction.

"If you were to pick ten people in the world that represent the business hall of fame, Li Ka-shing would be one of them," said award committee member Bill Watchorn.

At 72, Li Ka-shing has achieved more than most men could hope to in a dozen lifetimes. In business he has proved peerless, building a mighty empire and creating fabulous wealth in the process. Today his influence is felt across the globe.

Having met all the criteria in 1990, Mr Li had been invited to receive the award ten years ago, but declined to make the trip as his wife had recently passed away. Now, many among the audience mused upon Mr Li's additional accomplishments.

If his achievements up until 1990 were impressive, those in the past decade have been almost superhuman. Li Ka-shing seems hardly to have put a foot wrong. His companies continue to be major players in every important sector of the Hong Kong business arena while investments in telecommunications and



technology have proved powerful vehicles for merging his traditional businesses into the New Economy. In the past year, financial returns have gone through the roof with Hutchison's net profits exceeding US\$15 billion.

But in his speech Mr Li turned the clock back further, revealing that a few weeks earlier he had quietly recorded the 50th anniversary of the company he first built. On that anniversary day, which happened to be a public holiday, Mr Li woke up early, played golf, spent time with his granddaughter and read. There were no celebrations; no fancy parties.

Born in Guangdong, China, Mr Li recalled "the sadness of lost childhood in the turmoil of war, the helplessness of watching my father's suffering, the loneliness of poverty, the desperation of seeking employment as a 12-year-old, the joy of receiving my first paycheck, the enthusiasm in getting the first deal, the setting up of my own company, the comfort of my first home, the ever-eventful participation in global changes and development and the sheer magnificent feeling of accomplishments and recognition."

Li Ka-shing is not only widely admired and respected for his clout but is also genuinely popular in Hong Kong, his beloved adopted home. While he has a natural tendency to avoid the limelight, his business exploits keep him very much in the public eye. In a society that prides its businessmen as

ABOVE: IN PRIVATE HE'S QUIETLY RESERVED BUT IN BUSINESS LI KA-SHING IS SELDOM OUT OF THE LIMELIGHT; HERE HE RECEIVES THE INTERNATIONAL DISTINGUISHED ENTREPRENEUR AWARD FROM DR EMOKE SZATHMARY, PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA.

others pride their sportsmen and pop stars, Li Ka-shing is a towering presence; a reluctant superstar.

With 50 years at the top end of the cut-and-thrust business arena behind him, Mr Li must have many stories to tell. But there is one that stands out in the collective memories of the Hong Kong people:

It is September 25, 1979. At 11.30pm a surprise announcement reveals that Li Ka-shing's property company Cheung Kong (Holdings), undeterred by its smaller market cap, has bought a 22 per cent stake in Hutchison Whampoa from the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank. Hutchison is a mighty "hong", one of the powerful British-controlled trading companies that still reign supreme in Hong Kong. The announcement stuns the seemingly-impenetrable group of expatriate executives whose forefathers founded the colony in the 19th century.

When Li Ka-shing makes his move he is the first Chinese to enter the exclusive corridors of foreign corporate power. Not even Hutchison's executives have been notified in advance. It is a clarion signal that the times are changing. The people of Hong Kong quietly roar their approval. They nickname him "Superman" (*Chiu Yan*, in Cantonese) as Mr Li becomes a symbol of triumph over adversity, offering hope to the disenfranchised majority and securing an abiding place in their affections.

The move paves the way for Mr Li's astonishing ascent. Having made his fortune manufacturing plastic flowers in the 1950s and, later, playing the Hong Kong property market, he demonstrates almost uncanny business savvy, building the Group into a global heavyweight and becoming Hong Kong's most outstanding tycoon.

Just recently, Li Ka-shing was awarded a Knighthood by Queen Elizabeth "for his services to British industry and medical research". In the two decades since taking control of Hutchison Mr Li has made substantial investments in UK ports, telecommunications, property development and manufacturing, creating thousands of jobs for British citizens. He has also funded Cambridge University to undertake cancer research and social science exchange programmes.

Over the years Mr Li has endured his fair share of tragedy as well as triumph. Ever temperate in demeanour, self-effacing even, he has played a mighty part in shaping Hong Kong. Recently *Asiaweek* magazine named Li Ka-shing "Asia's most powerful man" — a label he makes light of, pointing to China's President Jiang Zemin as a more worthy recipient. "My decisions will only affect my shareholders and people associated with my companies, whilst his decisions influence everyone including me," he said, "how can I be said to wield more power than Jiang Zemin?"

Mr Li appears dismissive of the trappings of power: "Nothing can substitute for loyalty, integrity, fair-mindedness and

compassion," he told the Winnipeg audience. "For some, success in business is said to come at the price of sacrificing these values. But it is my belief that the increasing pressures to maximise profit and efficiency should not compromise our respect for equality and our determination to minimise misery. All our progress would hardly be meaningful if we chose to sacrifice human spirit in pursuit of money and power."

The loss and helplessness he went through had made him determined at an early stage, he said, "that I would not value myself for what I own or what power I can wield, but to make my life worth living."

Fifty years ago Li Ka-shing named his company Cheung Kong (Holdings) after the Yangtze River that flows through China, "a great river that aggregates countless streams and tributaries". But Mr Li has never been one to get bogged down in the past. "I think about where this 'river' should flow," he said. "This new century heralds an era of immense and destabilising changes. We all share, in different degrees, the success in the scientific revolution that creates more efficiency and gives us more

life. But we also face together the wide-ranging and threatening destruction of both our own natural environment and the fabric of the society we live in. In this information society, education demarcates those who have the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and know-how, and those who have not; those who are highly valued and those who are deemed unnecessary and unemployable. We all deplore the injustices and inequality that exist in our world today, but each of us has only limited power to change it."

Limited Mr Li's power may be, but it is less limited than most. His financial heft has enabled him to sponsor many causes, particularly education and medicine, where his contribution has been enormous (US\$520 million to date).

"The constant demand for one to be wise, to be far-seeing and to be creative is certainly tiring," he said, "yet all in all I am glad to say I am a happy man, for I have tried to serve society to the best of my ability as a human being, as a citizen and as a businessman."

In the view of many, Li Ka-shing has also, with great timing and grace, played the role of a Superman.

He has quietly earned tremendous respect as a leader, growing into a towering role model whose opinions and actions are closely followed. Yet Li Ka-shing remains steadfastly unaffected by his own remarkable accomplishments.

"Success and freedom are fundamental aspirations that can neither be narrowly characterised nor broadly defined," he said, "yet if one's success should be measured by whether we have achieved the goals we set for ourselves and our freedom is gauged by whether we could be responsible legislators of our own conduct, then we all have what it takes to be successful, we all have what it takes to be free."



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