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Brighter galaxy

Hong Kong tycoon has spent a lifetime turning his own wartime misfortune into good for others and society

By **HONEY TSANG**
and **WILLA WU** in Hong Kong

Fate denied Lui Che-woo a good education while young, but he became a hard-driving entrepreneur and, ultimately, Hong Kong's third wealthiest person. Also, the tough experiences of his early years endowed him with a rare quality, compassion.

It is widely acknowledged that education is the key to future prospects, so Lui, at 88, is still doing all he can to help others benefit from what he missed out on. That is the motivation behind the LUI Che Woo Prize, the international award he established.

Lui, a billionaire property developer, hotelier and philanthropist, was deprived of education in the 1940s because of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. Yet that wartime misfortune also kick-started his determination as a very young entrepreneur.

As chairman of the two listed companies K Wah Group and the Galaxy Entertainment Group, with a combined market capitalization of over HK\$329 billion (\$41.9 billion), he is now Hong Kong's third wealthiest individual. Lui's financial success has enabled him to benefit society and serve the community, motivated by the quest for peace and education that he was denied in wartime.

This was also the catalyst for establishing the LUI Che Woo Prize — Prize for World Civilisation. This international award was set up by Lui in 2015 with the aim of clearing a path to enhanced, civilized, sustainable and peaceful communities.

"I'd gone through harrowing moments during the war-torn period. The event has driven me to set my heart on building a better world," Lui told China Daily.

Since 2016, Lui has bestowed prizes of HK\$20 million each on laureates from around the world, recognizing their all-out endeavors to foster morality, harmony and positive energy in societies. Six international laureates have been awarded so far.

The LUI Che Woo Prize is still in its infancy, and Lui considers it a "seed", honoring those committed to the betterment of humanity.

"I've wished it to seep deeply into the soil of societies — and into people's hearts. One day it's going to sprout, spread and be reaped," he said.

Currently, the cash award of each LUI Che Woo Prize is around 2.5

times that given to recipients of the Nobel Prize.

Nobels have been handed out since 1901 for remarkable achievements in the arts and sciences and contributions to global peace. Lui's prize is also higher than the \$1.2 million Shaw Prize, established by the late Hong Kong philanthropist Sir Run Run Shaw in 2002 to honor individuals for academic and scientific breakthroughs.

Lui was born in Jiangmen, South China's Guangdong province, in 1929. He was a little boy when the Japanese army launched its attacks on the Chinese mainland. Later, Lui's family fled from their hometown, settling in Yau Ma Tei, Hong Kong, in 1934.

The peaceful life in Hong Kong did not last long, however. In 1941, Japanese forces invaded, placing Hong Kong under occupation. His family's business closed. Lui was forced to leave school. The city plunged into chaos, with corpses stacked along the streets due to mass starvation.

But the war impelled Lui to dream big. At 13, he hit the street, selling his own version of sachima — a traditional Chinese sweet and crispy pastry.

"I dropped out as a junior from secondary school. It was grueling for me, in my teens, to earn a living on my own," he recalled.

That was the time that Lui realized he had a knack for business. He earned 2 million Japanese military notes (equivalent to around HK\$500,000 at the time) by selling food on the street.

After the war, Lui worked for an automotive parts company. He worked diligently, acquiring as many skills as he could. And later, when the shop owner decided to close the business, Lui offered to buy it out with HK\$30,000. At 20, he began to build his fortune, selling vehicle parts to mainland partners.

His unceasing ambition drove him to venture into something bigger — heavy machinery. Hong Kong was on track for development, but construction hardware was scarce, he noted.

At the time, he was able to procure leftover US military machinery from Okinawa, through a friend who had studied at Japan's Waseda University.

In the early 1950s, when Hong Kong's government laid out plans to develop the barren Kwun Tong area into a pivotal industrial district, Lui knew it was his time to rise.

In 1955, Lui founded K Wah Construction Materials Limited. He then became a major player in the con-

struction of Kwun Tong, taking on around 80 percent of infrastructure projects.

Later, in the 1960s, Lui ventured into property investment. And in the 1980s he moved into the hotel industry. Lui's firm cooperated as a franchisee of world-renowned hotel brands including InterContinental, Marriott, Hilton and Sheraton.

In 2002, Lui set his sights on Macao's lucrative gambling industry. Today, K Wah's businesses span from construction materials to real estate, hotels and casinos. Lui has more than 33,000 staff worldwide.

Lui, in his charity works through the decades, has put most emphasis on educating young people. "The nation's future will be built brick by brick by the young. I will support them as much as I can," the billionaire said.

His contributions to education on the mainland can be traced back to the 1980s, when he donated HK\$3 million to construct Lui Che-woo Hall at Wuyi University in Jiangmen.

Later, he funded the reconstruction of 122 primary and secondary schools in eight provinces, including Southwest China's Yunnan province.

Lui has also helped fund the construction of university facilities in Hong Kong, and he has donated to American and Canadian universities — a way of giving back to places where he has profitable hotels.

Apart from his charitable work in education, Lui has funded environment, arts and culture, medical care and innovative technology sectors in the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and the US.

On July 1, 2012, the Hong Kong government awarded Lui the Grand Bauhinia Medal — considered the highest decoration for a local citizen.

As a tycoon running hotel and property empires that make billions of dollars, Lui is very aware that integration requires mutual understanding and tolerance.



LIANG LUWEN / CHINA DAILY

Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland each have their own advantages and should be humble. They should learn from and supplement each other, Lui said.

The LUI Che Woo Prize is considered the zenith of Lui's lifetime of philanthropy — which is also a vivid realization of his goal to integrate worldwide communities toward a civilized, harmonious world.

In 2017, Xie Zhenhua, China's special representative on climate change affairs, was awarded the LUI Che Woo Prize for Sustainability.

Xie donated his cash award (HK\$20 million) to the Tsinghua University Education Foundation to fund efforts to help mitigate climate change.

Landesa Rural Development Institute, an international non-governmental organization, was crowned with the LUI Che Woo Prize for Welfare Betterment, for its success in securing land rights for over 120 million of the world's poorest families in more than 50 countries over the past half-century.

Funds from the prize have helped Landesa open an office in Tanzania, Africa. Closer to home, Landesa sees momentum in supporting land tenure reform in the Chinese mainland, which is expected to offer secure land rights to more than 100 million women, said Chris Jochnick, Landesa's president and CEO.

"The (LUI Che Woo) prize itself is an opportunity for organizations to not only sustain the good work being done to promote human civilization, but also a chance to pursue new innovations that can enhance and deepen impact," said Jochnick.

Such comments are a good indication that Lui's spirit of altruism, toward building peaceful and sustainable societies, has been spreading, sprouting and blossoming.

Contact the writers at honeytsang@chinadailyhk.com

Bio

Lui Che-woo

Chairman, K Wah Group and Galaxy Entertainment Group

Achievements, milestones:

Founded the first K Wah company in 1955. The multinational conglomerate K Wah Group does business in construction materials, property development and investment, and entertainment, leisure and hospitality, across the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, Southeast Asia and the United States;

Founded the LUI Che Woo Prize — Prize for World Civilisation, in 2015, seeking to advance world civilization;

A long-term philanthropist supporting a series of sectors — predominantly education, the environment, the arts and culture, medical care and innovative technology — in the mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and the US;

Member of the Ninth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (1998-2003);

Member of the Election Committee for the first Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR);

Member of the Chief Executive Election Committee (hotel subsector) for the third and fourth terms of the HKSAR government.

Quick takes:

On the Belt and Road Initiative

The initiative has diversified the concept of the ancient Silk Road, expanding it from "a route to the West" to "the passage connecting China with the world". It will become one of China's greatest achievements in the future.

On the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

The plan will yield remarkable fruit, as the Greater Bay Area has great natural resources while Hong Kong is an international city which enjoys advantages and is robustly competitive in the global economy.

On high-speed rail

I have taken high-speed trains in Japan, France, Germany and China. To me, those running in foreign lands are no match for those in China, where these high-speed trains are fast, convenient and comfortable. Now the country is bringing such technology overseas, showing that China's high-speed train is very competitive.

On the motherland

China is on a good track. It becomes stronger and stronger. It develops in an open, inclusive way that benefits everyone.

In the future, I hope more comprehensive efforts will be put into the prevention and control of water pollution, especially in improving river basins and offshore areas.