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Building on a life of learning

Betty Chan picked up the baton handed to her by her mother and ensured Yew Chung school continues its passionate mission

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Education runs in Dr Betty Chan Po-king's family.

Her mother started what would become a lasting legacy during a time of instability and poverty, with a civil war raging on the mainland.

Tsang Chor-hang, then just 16, decided to set up a school with her friends.

"My mother thought education was the most effective way to make China stronger and, as a Christian, she believed letting children know about God was the best gift she could give to them," Chan said.

The school, Yew Wah, which literally means "bringing glory to China", started with a small classroom at the corner of Bute Street and Nathan Road in 1927.

It eventually transformed into what is today the Yew Chung International School, which now has campuses in Hong Kong, on the mainland and in the United States.

Chan is the school's director. Yew Wah offered primary education to children living in the nearby Kowloon neighbourhood, teaching Chinese poetry and gospel stories.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. Some of the founders suggested closing the school after three years as it had run out of money. But the others insisted on carrying on because parents had already paid their fees.

"At that time, school fees were paid in rice. So even though there was nothing else left, they had rice to eat. They didn't take any salary," Chan said.

Tsang became principal when she was just 19 and when she got older became known as "Hau Cheung Po Po", or principal grandma.

"In my eyes, my mother was a heroine. She was very capable," Chan said.

She recalled how parents followed rituals to decide when their children should start school, taking into account their birth time and dates.

As for the youngsters, they had to turn up dressed smartly and apply themselves diligently to their lessons.

In 1932, Yew Wah was replaced by Yew Chung, with its first campus in Sai Yee Street. The school was forced to close seven years later with the outbreak of the second world war. It reopened in 1945 and had its first batch of post-war graduates the following year.

Chan eventually started at the school, but it wasn't easy for her.

"When someone had to be made an example of, I would usually be the first, to show there was



Tsang Chor-hang probably had no idea of the legacy she would leave when she set up a school with her friends in 1927, which has over the years had many pupils pass through its gates. Photos: SCMP Pictures

My mother thought education would make China stronger

DR BETTY CHAN (PICTURED)



no bias," she said. Tsang eventually decided it would be better for her daughter to be educated at another school, so Chan left Yew Chung after Primary Four.

Tsang retired after four decades of teaching and closed the school.

Chan, who had trained as a teacher in the United States, started working in a kindergarten operated by Caritas.

She did not like its strict, traditional style and started using the more relaxed, modern theories she had been exposed to in America.

"Nursery is the first place a toddler spends time outside home, so it has to be comfortable," Chan said, adding that most kindergarten teachers then had just a high school education.

In 1972, Chan opened a nursery in Kent Road, Kowloon Tong,

and in honour of her mother named it Yew Chung.

A kindergarten followed, then the primary section in 1985 and secondary in 1992.

Her niece Lydia Chan Lai-seng, who also works at the school, started at Yew Chung when just 18 months old and was among the first graduates of the International Baccalaureate programme, which started in 2000. She went on to attend Cambridge and Oxford universities.

Betty Chan said she decided to open an international primary school after overhearing a conversation between a German father and his teenage son, who was on his way to Taiwan to study Chinese.

"I found the dad very insightful in wanting his son to learn Chinese," she said. "My first degree is in primary education, so I thought I could try starting an international primary school."

Chan said most international schools just brought in a curriculum from elsewhere, but she thought "international" should mean an integration of different cultures, instead of only Western.

The school adopted a bilingual policy, so Chinese and English have the same status. It has two principals, one representing the Western culture, the other one Chinese.

"Parents enrol their children in our school because they trust us," she said. "Sometimes I feel a lot of pressure as this style of education is my own invention."

ONLINE

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Making local schools an attractive bargain again

Quality education will stem the tide of pupils to ESF and international institutions, veteran says

The government should adopt a more forward-looking vision and clearer direction in education to attract local pupils back to local schools, the director of the Yew Chung International School says.

Dr Betty Chan Po-king also called for more resources for international schools to help them cope with the heavy demand for places.

Her comments came at a time when international school places are in short supply, as local parents turn to the institutions for what they perceive as supplying a better education for their children.

According to government figures, 13.7 per cent of the pupils in international and English Schools Foundation schools are permanent residents without a foreign passport.

Chan said the government should allocate more resources to international schools, so they could build more campuses. Yew Chung has a long waiting list and there are few places for pupils who did not start with the school at kindergarten level.

The government should improve the education system across the board at local schools, Chan said. "In the past, there were just too many changes in the curriculum," she said, explaining why some local par-



Improve the local system, says Dr Betty Chan. Photo: May Tse

ents had lost confidence in local schools. "We have seen many different people in the post of education minister and permanent secretary, too."

She said the city should first improve the quality of its nurseries and kindergartens, so children had a solid foundation for further studies. "The Education Bureau should have a clearer direction on what kind of education the children will receive."

The school charges an annual fee of HK\$54,930 to HK\$150,607 for early childhood education, HK\$158,580 for primary and HK\$154,390 to HK\$157,920 for secondary.

Asked whether high school fees limited quality education to wealthy families, Chan said education was expensive but the priority was that parents agreed with the school's approach and judged the education it provided as worth the price.

Chan's niece, Lydia Chan Lai-seng, who also works at the school, said that a higher quality of education at local schools would lessen the need for parents to look for alternatives for their children. "If the government was willing to invest, there wouldn't be any need for private schools," she said.

The proportion of total government spending that went to education for this financial year was 20.4 per cent, up from 18.6 per cent for the previous year. Ada Lee

20.4%

Proportion of total government expenditure allocated for education for 2012-13