



A vision for the world

Interview of Dr Thomas Sze-Tong Chan with student reporters

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An accomplished neurosurgeon, Dr Thomas Chan joined Queen Elizabeth Hospital in 1978 after graduating from the University of Hong Kong (HKU). A Founding Fellow of the College of Surgeons of Hong Kong, he is perhaps most well known for his humanitarian efforts, when he decided to leave his private practice at the peak of his career to take up the role of CEO of World Vision China and Hong Kong. For his humanitarian services, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by HKU in 2007.

In 1996, Dr Chan was approached by World Vision's board of directors, who were seeking to expand relief efforts in China. He recalled taking up the post of CEO at a time when the organisation was hit by scandals and lack of donations, and when the Chinese Government still viewed non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with skepticism and distrust. Charged with the task, Dr Chan relinquished his medical practice and dedicated his life to poverty alleviation in rural areas.

Established in 1950, World Vision is an international relief, development, and advocacy organisation that serves to improve the wellbeing of children around the globe. During his 14-year tenure, World Vision has accomplished many feats. Its donations grew 20-fold. It established itself as the pioneer US-founded relief organisation in China. It expanded its poverty relief and development programmes by gaining support from the central government, while maintaining its core values and principles.

Dr Chan's personal encounters range from infants starved to their bones at a North Korean orphanage, to

villages in Yunnan where half of the population were HIV positive. "It's a totally different perspective when you're holding an infant depleted of subcutaneous fat in your arms as opposed to looking at the photographs." This is how he recalled a visit to a famine-stricken village in North Korea and saw orphans being starved to death when he tried to break into a room that was hidden away by local officials.

His encounters have strengthened his belief that poverty alleviation must be accompanied by government action and public policy. With the world's abundance of resources as well as modern technology, no one should be starving to death, yet millions around the world continue to live in abject poverty because of government inaction. "What my organisation focuses on is to serve as the middle-man between resources and the needy, as well as the advocacy of better policies."

He cites the example of Yunnan, which has the highest HIV/AIDS rate in China due to rampant drug trafficking from neighbouring Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar. Through public education projects and years of dialogue with government officials, Dr Chan has seen an encouraging change in government policy towards HIV/AIDS, particularly in Yunnan where HIV-positive sex workers used to be locked up but now are treated more humanely as well as being given better access to medical care.

A paediatric neurosurgeon by trade, Dr Chan relishes his medical training that hard-wired him with a problem-solving mindset and framework for thinking,

in addition to familiarising him with public health issues such as communicable diseases, maternal and child health, and health promotion. But he cautions that, contrary to private medical practice, for what he now does, teamwork and communication with different stakeholders in reaching a consensus are paramount to the success of relief projects.

For instance, liaising with the Chinese Central Government and provincial officials was particularly important, as instilling confidence was crucial to the success of partnerships on long-term projects. During his tenure, Dr Chan saw the Central Government's attitude towards NGOs evolve from initial skepticism to trust and affirmation. To ensure that he is up to his job, Dr Chan acquired a Master degree in Business Administration, and subsequently a doctoral degree in Sociology from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

With overseas conferences and frequent visits to scattered employees stationed at local projects, Dr Chan's sacrifices were more familial than financial. Nevertheless, he considers them worthwhile so as to have an impact on a broader scale and developing a more comprehensive understanding of China. Currently, he serves as a board member and advisor for World Vision and devotes most of his time to his medical practice, but still visits his colleagues at World Vision once every two weeks.

Dr Chan considers his years spent in service fruitful, having enriched and added colour to his life. "Our society needs more opinion leaders," says Dr Chan. He urges members of the health care profession to widen their gaze and aspire to serve the community, not just through their medical practice, but also through advocacy and public policymaking to impact society at different levels.

Readers are encouraged to read Dr Chan's book "手術刀外的心路：一位腦外科醫生的另類版圖", a fascinating account of his journey from neurosurgery to poverty alleviation.



(Facing page)
Dr Chan playing games with pupils in a World Vision-funded kindergarten in Guangxi

(Top)
Dr Chan visiting a wounded victim of Wenchuan Earthquake in Sichuan

(Middle)
Dr Chan sharing pictures of his camera with children at a World Vision project site in Yunnan

(Bottom)
Dr Chan on his way to visit a family in Yongsheng of Yunnan Province