In Fond Memory of Michael

We gather here today, not to mourn the departure of a great scholar, but to celebrate the life of a great teacher and a dear friend. “I am Michael”, he knocked on my door, introducing himself, and welcoming me when I first joined the Faculty. That was 35 years ago. And he continued to do this for many new colleagues over the years. He was warm to everyone, whether you are a senior professor, an administrative staff or a tea lady. Everyone who knows Michael would be impressed by his good sense of humour, his amicable nature, and his warmth. He enjoyed the company of colleagues and friends. Almost every staff, academic or administrative, had been a guest of his hospitality.

Michael is a towering figure in professional legal education in Hong Kong. “Students who sat at the 1st row got distinction last year... but this year nobody is sitting here. So you will all fail.” Most PCLL students would remember how Michael would greet them at their first lecture. He is a great teacher, and has the remarkable ability to make even a subject like land law and conveyancing interesting and enjoyable. He would be among a handful of academic staff who has no problem to fill a lecture hall of 350 seats even at 8:30 am when that time slot was dreaded by everyone! “Oh, Hong Kong people like to buy air”. He started a lecture by pretending to be an estate agent, pointing up to the blue sky and telling a young couple that there is where you are going to have your love nest”. Or his famous dicta that “this case is rubbish”!

Michael was utterly devoted to teaching. He once said that it was “teaching and his student that kept him strong.” He would invite his students to his home for dinner, and when everyone was having a good time, he would spend some time individually with each student in order to know more about them. When he had finished with the last student, he rejoined the group and said that in view of the time constraint, he could only learn that the last student was 15 years old! The online book of condolence is full of admiration from his students,
and expressions like “it was an honour to have been taught by you” appear in practically every page. The one that caught my attention is this: “I have not been a great student, but you inspire me to be better.” He was a good listener. Many students have recounted how Michael has helped and encouraged them at times of difficulties in their life. A great teacher does not just impart knowledge; he inspires his students, not only in law, but also in life. He does not need any teaching award, as the appreciation of many, many generations of students is already the greatest honour and award for him. On 28 January this year, he was not feeling well. Colleagues suggested that he should just cancel the class. He insisted on giving his lecture, and promised to see a doctor after the lecture. He was admitted to hospital that evening after class, and never left. Michael did what he enjoyed most in life, and taught until his very last moment.

Michael was also a prolific scholar. The law of conveyancing will be far less interesting without his contribution. He covered a wide range of areas, from land to civil procedure to professional ethics. His works on these diverse areas are definitive and widely consulted by the profession. They shaped the development of the law far more than many academic articles that were typically read only by 5 people in the world! He read every single case in his field. Whenever I have a problem on land law, I would approach him as a walking encyclopedia. After he has shared his view, which he always did generously, he would add that “actually you know a lot more than I do!” That is the humility of a true scholar.

Michael was fond of his pipe. I have been trying to persuade him to quit smoking for years without success. Pipe is different from tobacco, he used to tell me, and said he could not think without his pipe. We have been next-door neighbours in the Faculty in the last 15 years. I know he has been suffering from cancer for some time. One day he came to my office to bid farewell, as he was going to have an operation at a time when he was having chemotherapy. “The survival rate is only 15%”, he said, “and I would hate to go without saying goodbye.” He survived; and told me he had to give up his pipe,
but he would soon be able to get a sip of gin and tonic. He always
looked on the bright side of life. He was not afraid of the inevitable,
as he regarded every new day a bonus. Many friends and colleagues
were surprised to hear that he was suffering from cancer, as he
showed no sign at all. He put up a brave battle against the illness,
worked as usual, and never complaint about it. And even at those
difficult times, he would still ask a colleague or a student, “could I do
anything to make you feel happier?”

I promised to take him to dinner at Derby, which was his favourite
restaurant, when he quitted his pipe. He did quit, though
involuntarily, but sadly he is no longer joining the dinner. I am sure
that he would now be taking up his pipe again at somewhere that he
no longer has to worry any more. Hardworking, industrious, public-
spirited, and humorous, this is Wilko, as he is fondly known. He has
left us, but he will always be with us. Michael, may you rest in peace!

Professor Johannes Chan
11 May 2019