

Our dearest Founding Principal Mrs Kitty Cheung

**~ A visionary leader and a great role model
for all girls who aspire for greater things in life**

by Ms Wong Yin-ling, Principal (2007-2013)

There is a very famous Chinese saying that goes, “A family with an elderly member is blessed with a treasure.” Indeed, ever since our school’s inception, Hotung girls have been truly blessed to have Mrs Kitty Cheung, who was at the helm from 1953 to 1967, around (and in top shape as well) for so many years until she passed away on 5 February, 2013 at the ripe old age of 101 and who can still mesmerize and inspire younger generations of students. I have kept telling my girls this ever since taking up the principalship in 2007. I am totally delighted that this sentiment is shared by our alumnae, especially those who grew up to be well-educated, well-mannered and successful women under the tutelage of such a remarkable educator.



In the last few years, two of my happiest experiences have to do with Mrs Cheung. On 12 March, 2011, 99 guests, including former Hotung girls, past teachers, three former principals as well as me, threw a Chinese lunch party in honour of this exceptional lady. The number of attendees was specially set as the occasion was meant to celebrate the 99th birthday of Mrs Cheung, which I think is a really sweet, thoughtful gesture to show their love, affection and respect for her. Again on 17th March, 2012, another birthday party of an even bigger scale was held, attended by over 140 former Hotung girls as well as past teachers and four former principals, in addition to me. Mrs Cheung was beaming with joy and smiles from the moment she arrived up to the very end of the functions. At one point, she was moved to tears as her former students and successors heaped heartfelt accolades and thankful words on her. She said that she never expected this when she started off back in the 1950s heading a ‘small’ school (which she worried might be closed in a few years) and so she felt very ‘blessed’. The unanimous thought, however, was that it was generations of Hotung girls who were truly blessed for having such a fearless, visionary leader who gave her all to lay a firm foundation for this community.

Every time I had the pleasure of meeting Mrs Cheung, I envied the fact that even in her nineties she remained a strong, healthy, beautiful, charming, elegant, impeccably attired and, most of all, fiercely independent lady. However, what truly enthralled me was the fact that she was not just a true fighter who strived to achieve her goals against all

odds but a caring, visionary leader who always had the best interests of the girls in her charge at heart. In short, she was the perfect role model for any girl eager to fully realize her potential and to make a difference, both for themselves and for others, in life.

When our school was first established in 1953, it was meant to be a trepid attempt by the colonial government at providing girls from poor background with basic vocational training. Mrs Cheung, however, realized on day one that such a path offered very limited prospects and would do her richly-endowed students a great disservice. She took resolute action right away. She fought for, and eventually obtained, permission to offer English language instruction for most of the subjects, a huge feat resulting in the broadening of her girls' career opportunities. She also took steady steps to broaden the curriculum, to upgrade the school's equipment and facilities, to attract outstanding, inspiring teaching staff, and to win wider recognition by entering her students for public examinations and competitions. As a result of her foresight and persistent effort, our school was considered, by the time of her retirement, one of the finest educational institutions by parents for their daughters.

I am also deeply impressed by Mrs Cheung's indomitable will for self-actualization. As a young woman born into a family of means and social position, she could have lived a life of leisure and abundance – although one dependent upon men's support and at the mercy of men's patronage in a patriarchal society. This, however, was not what Mrs Cheung wanted for herself. She was determined to forge a path of her own – living her life to the full, making it as meaningful and fulfilling as possible, and create happiness and prosperity for those whom she cared about. And with such a guiding spirit, it was no wonder that she was never browbeaten or discouraged by hardship, setbacks or obstacles. Over the years, she kept battling against, and always prevailed over, official disdain and indifference at the colonial education department, who looked down upon this 'little school' of ours. Sometimes, to secure the resources which she deemed essential to her students' education, she took full advantage of her personal connections in London and went over the heads of her superiors, who were understandably displeased but reluctantly had to yield to her wishes.

Mrs Cheung was truly a remarkable woman who was way ahead of her time. I still remembered how amazed I was when she told me that back in her youth she was among the ten young women who knew how to drive a car in Hong Kong, a skill which she learnt by cajoling the family chauffer into acting as her instructor while her family were on an overseas trip. In addition, she was among the very few young women who got into and graduated from the University of Hong Kong, once a male-dominated bastion. Last but not least, despite the daunting challenges she faced on a daily basis at our school, she was able to successfully play her other roles, as a loving wife to her husband and a caring mother to her children.

At Mrs Cheung's 99th birthday party cum lunch gathering, the most touching moment came when alumna Dr Susan Ho Fung-lin presented her beloved principal with an original Chinese painting. At the same time, she displayed a photocopy of the certificate in recognition of her having achieved 'First in Art' back in Form One, which bore the signature of Mrs Cheung and which she said inspired her to exert herself and succeed in the artistic field.

And if there is still anyone who is puzzled by Hotung girls' enduring love for Mrs Cheung, the public expression of gratitude, at her 100th birthday party, by alumna Ms Gloria Chow, graduate of 1964, serves to amply illuminate the sentiment. She revealed that when she was in junior forms, she was tragically orphaned overnight. When Mrs Cheung found out about her situation, she immediately took her under her wings. As the principal was concerned about her frail health, she arranged for the girl to have lunch with her and the teachers every day! And they also gave Gloria pocket money to spend – out of their own pocket! Thanks to their kindhearted support, she was able to stand on her feet eventually. No wonder Gloria declared passionately, "I owe my life to Mrs Cheung!" – before giving her mentor a warm, tender hug.

Our school's tremendous growth and surging success in the 1950s and 1960s was a testament to Mrs Cheung's leadership, dedication and vision. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to once again express, on behalf of all Hotung girls present and past, our deepest gratitude to Mrs Cheung for giving her all to transforming this small school of ours into a wonderful place of learning, love, joy, fun, community and empowerment for local teenage girls.

