

# Legislative councillor condemns

# A city that sold its soul

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Profile: DESMOND LEE  
By BERNARD FONG

**L**EGISLATIVE Councillor Mr Desmond Lee Yu-tai is one of 87 million Chinese Lees in the world.

When Acting-Governor Sir David Akers-Jones asked who would like to query the Chief Secretary, Mr David Ford, on whatever issue that was being discussed at the Legislative Council on a March day, many hands went up.

"All right Mr Lee, it is your turn," Sir David said. Then half of the council stood up. "No," Sir David said, a bit vexed, "I mean Mr Lee Yu-tai."

The problem with being a Mr Lee is the same as that with being a Mr Smith in a Western country - it is not easy to be recognised and so one must try harder, which is what Desmond does.

Ten years before 1997 and already the Chinese language press is speculating who would be the first chief executive for the Special Administrative Region and the bets are on one of the quarter million Lees in Hongkong.

Mr Desmond Lee is in a jolly and loquacious mood these days, pleased by his television appearance, radio and newspaper interviews over the past several weeks on a slew of topics for which he always expresses a strong opinion.

He is aware that in the media only pointed remarks, often repeated, register and that the offence always comes across more convincingly than the defence.

Between Mr Martin Lee, Mr Allen Lee, Mr David Li and Mr Desmond Lee, millions of words flow; together they get more print and air time than all the other legislative councillors.

Desmond knows how the media work. He gives television stations glib remarks which resound over the air. For the print medium he is more introspective but no less engaging.

A fellow councillor who does not like Mr Lee gibes, "Desmond is a cad and a ham really,

always pandering to the press and shooting from the hip."

The same appointed councillor adds grudgingly and enviously, "one must admit, being elected, he has to cater to his constituents and he is very adept at that." But then he cannot resist: "It does not take much to be liked but it takes a lot to be wise."

Mr Lee's constituents in the island Eastern District comprise factory hands in Chai Wan, merchants in Causeway Bay, housewives in Tai Koo Shing and journalists in Quarry Bay. "You cannot please everyone," Mr Lee confesses, "but I try."

The first subject that rouses Mr Lee this afternoon is aptly banking as he conducts the interview in the inner sanctum of the legislature, across the street from the modern-gothic Hongkong and Shanghai Bank headquarters.

Mr Lee says, "The banking scenario today is an unscrupulous banker bilking the depositors, making rash loans and getting into trouble."

"The government then baits out the banker, using taxpayers' money. And if the legislative councillors bark at the sudden-death salvage plan, the finance secretary sneaks around and gets it done anyway, secure in the knowledge that there is a convenient law to lend legality to the whole darn sham."

"Nice. With the bank, it is always somebody else's money!"

Replace "bank" with "government" and the observation would be equally pertinent, he says.

Mr Lee winks. The interviewer winks. There is a whole lot of winking going on, but then this is Hongkong.

Besides being a busy television personality, Mr Lee is an adult education advisor at the Polytechnic, nominally "working under" Legislative Council peer Mrs Rita Fan who admits

to be in awe of her junior's style. As for the content of his political message, she reserves her judgment with, not a wink, a delphic smile.

Mr Lee is today incensed at the feverish competitiveness of local higher education. "My wife, a teacher, and I are paying \$100,000 a year to put our daughter through grade 13 in Ontario just so she has a chance to enrol in a university," he grouses.

Happily "my older son's grades should qualify him for the Chinese University," Mr Lee reports, for every voter likes a distinguished man who shares his daily frets but not necessarily his foibles.

He says, "I am very ordinary," and considers that a virtue.

**I**N politics one must seem earthy but noble, great but humble, smart but not snooty; above all the chosen person should, as American historian Professor Daniel Boorstin observes, be extraordinarily ordinary with only a hint of glamour and none of hubris. Desmond fits the populist bill and says so.

That only four per cent of the Hongkong secondary school graduates are accepted into the two universities and the Polytechnic is, he says, an indictment of the present system which incidentally pays his salary.

That he is "bleeding financially" to get his little girl into college 10,000 miles away makes "the travesty" worse and the story more interesting for no doubt thousands of his constituents are in the same bind.

He says it is too bad that what the Hongkong residents dole out to overseas universities and boarding schools does not go down in the statistics sheets as import-export figures; otherwise trade would be entirely in

America and Canada's favour.

"A lot of money and talents are siphoned from Hongkong every year because the Education Department does not value human resources," he rues.

Mr Lee, Hongkong and Chinese University trained, discusses "the dearth of second opportunities" for adults who, having been weeded out from higher education by the stringent university entrance exams, are flocking to night classes.

The open university concept is splendid, says Mr Lee, now animated, envisaging a future of adult education television and more courses by mail.

The councillor thinks for - and of - himself a lot, usually with abiding fondness and occasionally with endearing self-mockery.

Mr Lee, aged 42, an adroit politician who dabbled in district board affairs in 1981 before his election to the precinct council a year later, knows all the hot social buttons and when to push them for maximum effect.

Desmond says, "Being elected, one must be aware of what the public wants."

He also realises the importance of taking seriously the cavils and quailings of his motley supporters who want more say in public affairs but hate giving other blokes a break.

One of the hottest buttons in 1987 is the government-decreed pay increase for the Filipino maids.

Mr Lee, empathising with his constituents who believe the Filipinas are getting a great deal at their expense, says: "To up their salary from under to \$2,000 to \$2,300 in one swoop is ridiculous."

"That is a 17 per cent increment against an annual average inflation rate of three per cent that puts the foreign maids on a higher income plane than many Hongkong workers."

What really riles Mr Lee is that the maids are getting "guaranteed employment" with their two-year contracts.

That the Filipinas have the