

# A lifetime spent in social service

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## CONVERSATIONS



with  
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**W**HEN Wong Yick-ming was a 14-year-old third former, she told her mother she wanted to go to the Walled City of Kowloon to mix with drug addicts, prostitutes and down-and-outs.

"Certainly," said Madame Wong Poon Cher Ying. "Very good".

In her office at the Duke of Windsor Social Welfare Building at Wanchai, the youngest member of Executive Council throws back her head and gives a peal of joyous laughter.

"My mother was very liberal," says Rosanna Tam Wong Yick-ming. "She always gave me her support."

In those days of the mid-60s, such support was necessary because the Walled City was then a truly dreadful place. For a sheltered young girl from a comfortable home in the Mid-Levels, it was "a different world".

Rosanna Tam wasn't making the trip cross the harbour for fun. Even as a teenager, she was guided by a sense of devotion, an idea of dedication.

Coming from a devout Christian background, she went to the dank, filthy and dangerous alleys with a group of social worker volunteers protected by their righteousness.

That was instilled early by her parents who had come from Fujian to Hongkong before World War II.

As a student at St Stephen's Girl School in the 1960s, Rosanna Tam leaned toward helping the less fortunate. She got involved in church activities, much of which was directed into social work.

Once a month, she went with older people to the Walled City. Her work was humble, running messages and fetching things, but she gained an insight into how the desperate lived.

"Addicts and prostitutes, well, they are all human beings. They all need help and love.

"When I went into the Walled City, it was very different from my home in the Mid-Levels. But I didn't feel the dirt. I didn't feel disgust."

In addition to her studies, she stayed involved in voluntary work throughout her schooling. She went to sit with lonely elderly folk, helped counsel younger children, was active in youth centres, sang for the old at Christmas and Easter parties.

Did her Christian background lead her into social work?

Probably, she concedes.

When she passed her exams that gained her entry to the University of Hongkong, there was no doubt what she was going to study.

"I knew I was going to follow social work," she says.

"I really wanted to prepare myself professionally to help people."

That's what she has been doing in the 14 years since her graduation. She got a junior job at the Hongkong Federation of Youth Groups, began as a humble youth worker in Tsuenwan and in 1980, aged 28, was named general secretary.

Maybe it was a bit young to hold down such a hefty administrative post, she says, looking back.

Nobody could criticise the Hongkong Federation of Youth Groups, where she has worked since she graduated from university with her degree in Social Science in 1975, for wasting money on decor.

It is modest to the point of grimness, tiny cramped rooms painted a dull institutional off-white.

From these unimpressive headquarters, Rosanna Tam heads an umbrella service that seeks to link 53 of youth units and centres that have a total of 370 staff and which serve more than a million children

and teenagers. It is a service that coordinates all aspects of work with youth by scores of organisations.

As such, it was a logical springboard for a challenge issued to Rosanna Tam by the Governor, Sir David Wilson, two years ago.

She was appointed chairman of a committee charged with looking at how overseas countries developed their youth policies. Her committee examined Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore, USA, Britain, Holland and Australia, among others, and came to the conclusion that there was much to offer from many sources. They thought Japan's system was the best. China? "What youth policies?" she answers.

The Governor accepted the report, compiled over 24 months, and incorporated many of its ideas when he announced the formation of a new Youth Commission to be set up early next year.

This will be a new concept aimed at dedicating a strong effort to helping and encouraging the young people of Hongkong.

Strongly tipped to be the first head of the Youth Commission is Rosanna Tam.

There is a need, she argues, to train your people today to run the Hongkong of tomorrow. This doesn't just mean businessmen and professionals but in other fields like civics and politics.

The problems of young people have changed a lot since she first started working with youth professionally in the 1970s.

Then, teenagers went to youth centres to try to learn something, to make friends, to meet people.

There were some difficult cases, children experimenting with drugs, runaways and children who hated school.

But their problems were a lot less complex than now. In 15 years, the situation has changed.

Soft drugs are now used more extensively by young people. There are significant changes in family structure and relationships. Young people can't communicate with their parents. Children turn to crime at an earlier age. Teenage sex is much more prevalent.

She sighs, the usual cheery optimism giving way to a sense of sadness as she tells of nine-year-old shoplifters and 12-year-old girls who have been aborted but are already pregnant again.

"There are no problem children," she explains. "There are problem parents. Some are divorced. Some work like mad and don't have time for their children. Some are over-protective.

"Some parents come into centres with their children and say they just can't handle them. They want social workers to do the work of parents."

She still gains a great deal of satisfaction, a huge amount of happiness, when she is able to help.

"It gives you a sense of hope," she explains. "They are our future."

She went to Canada in 1977 to study for two years at the University of Toronto where she gained a Masters. Then she returned to the agency as a supervisor.

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lieve everything their parents had been telling them over the years, that it had been proved true. They felt they had seen the true face of communism.

"Lots of young people love China. They are proud of Hongkong but knew they were Chinese.

"Now a lot want to leave. Many feel they should stay and help make Hongkong work, but others want to go."

For her part, she's positive.

She plans to tap this feeling for Hongkong in the territory's first Youth Festival to be held throughout December.

The theme will be simple. "We Are Hongkong" the banners will proclaim over the festivities and it will be aimed at making a statement by the young people of Hongkong about their home town.

Being pretty young herself, is it an advantage in her work? Do youth workers have to be youthful?

"Not at all," she smiles. "It's the attitude that's most important.

"You can't deal successfully with young people if you are authoritarian. Young people don't like it. So you never act like a parent. You have to be like a friend."

Her attitude is highly approachable. She's articulate, intelligent but refreshingly down-to-earth. Convinced Christian she may be. She doesn't attempt to preach. She believes in leading by example.

The relaxed, friendly but serious social worker was rocketed from the comparative obscurity of a subvented agency into the public eye following a telephone call to her home in 1985.

She had just come out of hospital after giving birth to her son when the telephone rang and a Government House aide asked if she would be free to drop up for a chat with Sir Edward Youde.

The kindly administrator had a simple question. Would she be willing to serve on the Legislative Council?

"I was astonished," Rosanna Tam says today. "I had never met Sir Edward before but he had obviously taken a lot of trouble to

find out about me." Before she accepted, she asked for a couple of days during which she wanted to talk the proposition over with her husband, a doctor specialising in caring for children.

Her positive answer saw the 35-year-old take her place on the benches at Legco where she expected to contribute mostly to issues involving youth and social work.

Lately, these horizons have been extended considerably because in recent months Rosanna Tam has been in the headlines in her capacity as head of the Omelco special working group dealing with nationality issues. In this capacity, she has travelled to London in July and met the local press and members of parliament. Last month, she was down in Kuala Lumpur and spoke to former Foreign Secretary John Major to press the case for a place of abode for Hongkong people and has journeyed to Kuala Lumpur to bring our situation to the eyes and ears of Commonwealth leaders.

Today, she speaks with even more authority. The woman who was the youngest head of a major social service agency (at 28) and the most youthful Legco member (at 33) was in 1985, after a mere three years as a Councillor, elevated to Executive Council as a comparative stripling of 36 years.

She sees her July mission to London, carried out at a time of tension with Tiananmen concentrating the public mind on the future, as being "fruitful."

Her one regret is that the heavy burden of Exco and Legco duties, the social commitments she tries to keep to a minimum and the long hours of studying papers and briefing documents deny her much time with her children.

She insists on being with them as much as possible. As a social worker, she points out, a boy of four and a girl aged eight need their mother. At home, it is only after the children are in bed that she brings out the briefcases stuffed with her legislative homework.

But the burden is also a joy.

She says, with simplicity: "I thanked God for the appointment to Exco because it will allow me to serve the people of Hongkong.

"I've learned so much since I was appointed to Legco and Exco. It makes me humble."

Such sentiments expressed by most political figures would cause the cynic to raise a sceptical eyebrow. Not with her.

Rosanna Tam is so obviously honest, so transparently decent and a person whose evident priority is the public good that she can get away with expressing such sentiments. You've got to believe her because it's so apparent she means just what she says.

"I've never had any urge to change jobs," she says. "Every day is a new one, a fresh start."

Are the problems of this changing Hongkong - The Anxious Society? - causing some of the difficulties in the lives of young people.

Yes, she muses. Maybe.

"Most young people were born in Hongkong. They didn't come here as refugees with strong anti-communist feelings like their parents.

"Many youngsters had a good impression of China. They had lots of hope in the future and faith in the Joint Declaration and the new system that will come after 1997.

"They thought China was opening up. They had lots of hope and faith. None wanted to leave Hongkong.

"Then came June 4 and they were shocked and disappointed. They had lost what they had faith in.

"Suddenly, they started to be-