

# Profile

## Professor Tsang Shu Ki – from student movement activist to academician

For Professor Tsang Shu Ki of the Department of Economics, the route to reach the “ivory tower” has been filled with twists and turns.

Born several years after the Second World War, it was beyond his wildest imagination that he would ever establish an enviable career in arguably what could be regarded as parts of the social apex – being an economist employed with a bank at the height of the currency crisis and followed by a second vocation in becoming a university scholar.

Professor Tsang did not study economics in his undergraduate years. He took up philosophy and political science instead because he wanted to explore some new subjects which were not taught in his secondary school. But studying was not the major thing he did, as he was immersed in a unique chapter of Hong Kong’s history and turned into a student movement activist.

He recalled that “the emphasis in the subjects I chose was critical thinking and ideology, for which there was no need for me to memorize or learn plenty of facts or ideas by rote,” he said. “In fact, I skipped lessons quite often to take part in the student movements,” he admitted.

Professor Tsang was engaged in many mass protests against social and political injustice and he was elected the vice president of the Hong Kong University Student Union in his last undergraduate year. He said at that time most of students were under the sway of different ideologies including anarchism, Trotskyism, Maoism, neo-Marxism and liberal-democracy and the society was overflowing with public outcries about colonial suppression, widespread corruption, and the Diao Yu Island movement, among other concerns.



At Vik, Southern Iceland (2007).

As one of the student leaders, he participated in quite a number of street demonstrations. He was in the group of the frontline organisers of the “Fight Corruption, Arrest Godber” campaign which subsequently led to the establishment of the ICAC in the colony. “To prepare myself for being caught by police and charged with civil disobedience, I always kept a hundred dollars in my pocket as bail money if required, so as not to bother my parents,” he said.

As time went by, Professor Tsang entered another turning point of his life in the mid-1970s. “Mainland China was launching its reforms and open policies, under which the central focus was placed on economic issues” he said. And he found that he had limited knowledge of economics, therefore he decided to switch track. He enrolled for the MBA programme at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and embarked on his first step of becoming an economist.



With wife Joanne at Jiuzhaigou, Sichuan, China (2004).

After earning his MBA, he joined the financial sector as a credit analyst, and worked as a gold and foreign exchange dealer, as well as a treasury assistant. With “enough” money, he then pursued studies in economics at the University of Manchester where he met his future wife and eventually obtained a doctorate degree.

Back in Hong Kong in the 1980s, he gained first-hand exposure working at the core of the currency board system when he was employed as an economist with the note-issuing Chartered Bank in the midst of the speculative attack on the Hong Kong dollar, before starting a teaching career with HKBU.

As a well-known scholar in the areas of Hong Kong’s monetary policies and China’s economic reforms, we asked him about his most notable accomplishment in the interview. Unexpectedly, it has nothing to do with his professionalism; it is rather about a dramatic event that occurred in the summer of 2002. He was diagnosed with oesophagus cancer and had his whole gullet removed. Despite the ordeal, which involved radiation and chemical therapy in a long sick leave, he survived. Pondering his own mortality and the fragility of human life, he said: “I am all too aware of the limitations of being human. And if someone were to ask me to sum up my ‘achievements’ so far, I would say that there’s nothing greater than survival from cancer.” ■