

ASIAN HOTEL & CATERING TIMES

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TOP OF HIS CLASS

Profile – professor Kaye Chon, dean,
the School of Hotel and Tourism
Management Hong Kong

Hong Kong SAR	HK\$50
China	RMB50
Singapore	S\$15
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Rest of Asia	US\$10



Master and servant

Professor Kaye Chon, dean and chair professor at the School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, tells *Daniel Creffield* how a passion for inspiring tomorrow's leaders – and a seagull – have contributed to his success

As a small boy growing up in his native South Korea, professor Kaye Chon set himself a lifetime goal of visiting 100 countries.

Clearly already a deep thinker and reasoner, the young Chon realised he must have a profession that would enable him to travel, and that the two most achievable options were as either a hotelier or a diplomat.

"When I grew up in Korea I was intrigued by the outside world," says the respected dean and chair professor at the School of Hotel and Tourism Management at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

"I was interested in learning languages and knew I wanted to travel. Of the two options that would allow this, a hotelier seemed the more glamorous and interesting," he laughs.

Not old enough to yet realise his dream, however, the next best thing was to try to learn about the world while still at home.

"I had pen pals in 86 countries! I guess I was extraordinary boy in this respect."



Pre email, however, he was probably extraordinarily unpopular with the postman, who had to deliver mail from around the world on a regular basis. Bolivia, Kenya, France, Britain – the influx of cosmopolitan correspondence motivated and inspired the young Chon to eventually travel to the US to study, gaining qualifications from the University of Maryland, Georgia State University, University of Nevada, Las Vegas and Virginia Tech.

Previously professor and director of research and director of the Tourism Industry Institute at the University of Houston's Conrad N. Hilton College in the US, Chon is recognised internationally for his research, scholarship and academic leadership in the areas of hospitality management, hospitality and tourism marketing and convention tourism.

He has lectured and given presentations in more than 90 countries, published over 200 papers in international journals and professional publications and authored or edited eight books. One of his textbooks, *Welcome to Hospitality: an Introduction* has been adopted as a textbook in more than 100 hospitality and tourism schools worldwide.

Recognised for an outstanding teaching career that spans close to 30 years, Chon has received numerous awards from prominent academic institutions, as well as the United Nations World Tourism Organisation prestigious UNWTO Ulysses Prize 2011 and 'most outstanding alumni in 30 years' in 2003 from his alma mater Georgia State University.

Disarmingly, he puts part of this success down to a seagull – namely *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, one of the best-selling books of all time, about a bird learning about life and flight, and a homily

about self-perfection, first published in 1970.

"It inspired me," he smiles. "Who was I? A small boy growing up in Korea! The book gave me a vision – a concept of how to see yourself. If I think like an eagle I can fly – I can achieve anything!"

Another key to his success, he reveals, is to do everything with passion.

"Young people are influenced by three groups of people – their parents, their teachers and religious leaders (if they have a faith). I find teaching – influencing young people's lives – such a rewarding and noble profession. Teachers have such an important role, and I take this job very seriously. Each of us are products of someone who taught us.

"I always say to colleagues that the teachers who influenced me was not those who just shared mathematical formulas, but those who between classes also shared their advice, their feelings, their personalities."

Perhaps it is partly this ethos that has seen Chon credited with making the School of Hotel and Tourism Management one of the world's leading institutions in its field. In 2009 it was ranked no. two in the global ranking of hospitality and tourism schools based on research and scholarship, according to a study published in the *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*.

"I thought – why not Hong Kong? I knew the 21st century would be the century of Asia – especially in the hospitality and tourism industry. Previously our kind of schools existed mostly only in Europe and the US. I wanted to make ours a leading school of its kind in the world, but based in Asia. This vision has largely been achieved."

Hotel ICON, the teaching and research hotel built for the School of Hotel and Tourism Management by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, was also Chon's brainchild.

"Why the icon name? It's a symbol, a tower – a monument to the Asian era. It's a grand vision for our business.

"The centre of gravity of the world's hospitality industry is in Asia. The modern hotel industry was born in Switzerland, before the USA's pioneering advances in service and F&B made it the dominant force throughout the 20th century. But over the last 10 years trends and new ideas have been emerging first in Asia, influencing the rest of the world. Not just hospitality but all industries."

Certainly in terms of service there is no doubt that Asia is the world leader.

"Service has a lot to do with Asian culture. We take service personally. If a guest is unhappy staff feel uncomfortable – in other cultures they may feel it's the guest's problem. The service spirit comes quite naturally here – the desire to treat people well.

"Look at some of our hospitality groups – Shangri-La, Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, The Peninsula Hotels – these are some of the finest hotels worldwide. You used to have to travel to the West to find best practice – now Asia leads the way. Both in terms of facilities and service – the hardware and the software, if you like."

In terms of service, Chon practices what he preaches.

"I consider myself a servant – to serve the lecturers and staff so they can do the best possible job. I am here to prepare for the future generation – who will be leaders, greater and better than us. But I have to be a leader too – a visionary. I need to offer clear strategies, to mobilise resources. Combining these, I describe myself as a servant leader!

Ultimately success depends on the success of students, he insists. And in order to achieve this, students and the staff at his school enjoy an unusually close and supportive relationship.

"This is the underlying culture. And this culture is evident

from the first day of the first semester, when staff all go outside to greet the new incoming students. It's an example of how students are made to feel welcome as guests and 'customers'. Our students often say on Facebook how the professors here are different from others they have known!"

This has not always been straightforward though, he stresses, and he has had to introduce strategies – some of which were initially questioned by teaching staff – in order to get them on side.

These have included extended team-building exercises, often taking place over several days at a retreat in China. Up to 80 people attend the sessions, not only thrashing out concerns and issues, future strategies, strengths and weaknesses, etc, but also taking part in fun performances, where people are randomly selected and thrown together.

"Typical academics are usually so busy with teaching and research that they can become fragmented and individualistic. Staff members can also be very diverse. For example we have 20 nationalities here – that means 20 different ways of thinking! I always joke that managing people is always challenging – managing professors even more challenging!

"I have found that if you can mobilise their wisdom and experience you gain power. Largely the success of our school is from maximising the potential of these staff members. That is our culture – working towards individual as well as the school's goals."

And as to his original dream, of visiting 100 countries – has that been achieved?

"I think I'm up to 97," laughs Chon, who is married, with a son in the US and now has a grandson, and a daughter studying towards her PhD. "But I hope to get there eventually!" **AHCT**

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