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Interview: Dissecting feminism with Anson Chan and Su-Mei Thompson - TEDx Wan Chai Women

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TEDx has gone girly. But it's not an insult. Anna Cummins meets Anson Chan, former Chief Secretary, and Su-Mei Thompson, CEO of The Women's Foundation, to ponder the meaning of feminism, female Chief Executives and why boobs sell burgers, ahead of their talk on May 31



Chan (left) and Thompson (right)

Feminist. It's a loaded term. By definition, of course, it simply means someone who believes in equality of the sexes, but in practice it's used as often for sly insult as it is for praise. Anson Chan and Su-Mei Thompson are two Hong Kong women who are the embodiment of the term's intended meaning. Chan served as HK's Chief Secretary, the city's second-in-command, from 1987 to 1993 – making her the first-ever female head of the civil service. When Chan began her career in 1962 she was such a novelty as a female in the civil service that she was introduced at a press conference. At first she was paid only 75 percent of what her male colleagues earned, but went on to witness the introduction of wage parity and equal fringe benefits for women in the government, before rising to the top.

Thompson heads up The Women's Foundation, a non-profit organisation that works to empower women in the community. Their latest project is a 60-minute film entitled *She Objects*, which explores the portrayal of women in the media our city.

The duo are just two of the speakers at TEDx Wan Chai Women (see: [What is TED?](#) below), a day-long panel talk on May 31 that invites women and men to give eight-minute presentations on the theme of 'momentum' in the context of women's issues, both local and international. An avalanche of interest ensued as soon as the event was announced and registration is, sadly, already closed due to the demand. Ahead of the event, we talk to Chan and Thompson about their opinions on how far women's equality has come and how far it's got left to go.

So, what are you talking about during TEDx Wan Chai Women?

Thompson: This event comes on the back of the [TED Women](#) conference taking place in Monterey, California, three days earlier. The HK event has the same theme as the flagship – 'Momentum'. I think there is something compelling about the woman's place moving forward, gaining speed, gaining traction – that is exactly what we're trying to do at The Women's Foundation! I am going to talk about some of the root causes behind gender biases, how the media promotes the thinness ideal and the impact this is having on eating disorders and girls' self esteem.

So – what do you both honestly think of the word feminist?

Chan: Most people object to it because it has a sort of pejorative connotation. I never regard myself as a feminist. I just regard myself as fighting for my just due. I believe if you're in positions of power you have a responsibility to push social issues.

Thompson: It's funny how the labels for gender equality have changed over time. The word suffragette does not have the same connotation as feminist – they were amazing, pioneering, brave women. But 'feminists' – the media caricatures women as wearing boiler suits and never shaving their armpits! But those who are the most vocal proponents of equality, it's people like Angelina Jolie, Emma Watson, Patricia Arquette. I think it's cool. Actually men can be feminists, too.



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As the theme is 'momentum', how well placed is Hong Kong to drive change across Asia for women's rights?

Thompson: I think the potential is there but the attitudes need to change for that to be achieved. We have some tremendous role models like Anson, but we don't have enough of them. The 'old boys' network is still very entrenched in Hong Kong. There are so many bright women graduating from our universities and joining the workforce but the upper echelons of power are still dominated by men across industries and professions, with some sectors more resistant to female leaders than others. How can it be that in our Court of Final Appeal, all 21 judges are male?

Chan: In my university (HKU) not a single vice-president is female. We know from chatting with female lecturers that they have great difficulty securing tenure. Fortunately, the new vice-chancellor at HKU (Peter Mathieson) has made it his priority.

How do you think China does on these issues in general?

Thompson: I think there is a difference in the status of women in China and in HK. The Cultural Revolution helped to promote gender equality. Women are more explicit about their ambitions in China but women in HK don't think that way. I think this is partly because of Hong Kong women being more prone to Western guilt about being a bad mother if you also have a demanding job, and partly because of more entrenched stereotypes in Hong Kong society about men, women and leadership aptitude. It's a big generalisation but in terms of naked ambition the Mainlanders have it more than we do.

Anson, what kind of attitudes did you encounter when you joined the civil service?

Chan: I recall one of my colleagues asking me in 1962 'why do you want a career? You should be content at home' [laughs]. When I joined the administrative service out of the whole cadre of 120, there was one woman. The year I joined, my colleague and myself were the second and third women to be recruited. They thought it was such a novel idea, they organised a press conference to show us off. So much has changed!



How much of an influence do domestic helpers have on the employment rate and ease of childcare for local women?

Thompson: We still lag behind global standards in terms of female participation in the workforce. Remember, only 10 percent of families here can afford a helper or have space. We have a pool of foreign domestic helpers and that is helping a percentage of the population, but the live-in policy [requiring helpers to live with their employers] is putting a choke on the extent of available part-time childcare which could help many more families and many more women return to work after childbirth.

Another factor is HK's statutory maternity leave; we get just 10 weeks here. This lags behind the International Labour Organisation's recommended 14 weeks. China has 14 weeks; Singapore is at 16 weeks. Why are we behind? This doesn't encourage women to be mothers and to work – especially coupled with the crazy work ethic in HK where people who work part-time are often regarded by employers and fellow employees as uncommitted and unambitious.

The Women's Foundation is behind the 30 Percent Club, which champions putting more women on corporate boards. What do you say to people who argue this is 'positive discrimination'?

Thompson: There is research that shows that on a board of say 10 people on average, the tipping point is having three women before it's not a gender issue any more and the women don't feel like they are tokens. It becomes just the board. Around the world, we are stuck at about 15 percent for many boards, which suggests those women have been appointed to tick a box. We'd love to get to the point where we change our name to the 50 Percent Club but we have to be realistic. Just 10 percent of the total director pool of Hong Kong-listed companies are women, with 40 percent of boards having no women at all. We clearly have a way to go!

Chan: There's always this excuse that there are 'no women suitable for the job'. Well, there never will be unless you give them the exposure and training! I never used to be in favour of quotas but I am coming round to the view that a time limited quota might help to focus minds.

Anson, how would you feel if Carrie Lam became the next Chief Executive? Is it true you said she should quit following the unpopular political reform package?

Chan: Not really. I said that there comes a point in anyone's career, particularly when you are high profile, when you have to ask yourself if your job is something you can do in good conscience. If the conclusion is you can't, then you always have a choice of going. And I would go. It's important to leave on a high note and not feel like you've been forced. Having said that, we're all looking for a CE with some standing in the community and, in the eyes of many HK people, Carrie would fit that bill. And it would be great to have the first female CE.

How does HK fare when it comes to portrayal of women in the media?

Thompson: I think there are very unrealistic portrayals of women in the media and this is leading to some seriously negative consequences. We think it's time all of us as media consumers object. The Women's Foundation is actually making a documentary on these themes – it's going to be called *She Objects* and will explore how women are portrayed in the media and look at rising incidences of violence and harassment against women. It's also going to look at the body thinness ideal. Thirty percent of the pages of our entertainment magazines are slimming and beauty ads for women – no wonder eating disorders are on the rise in Hong Kong. And it's also going to examine how the leadership ambition of women is being eroded by the way the media stereotypes male and female characters in movies and TV programmes. (View the teaser trailer below).



What about the news that Double D Burgers and Hooters are opening in the city – the restaurants using sexualised images to sell food?

Thompson: I've been interviewed by other media who were trying to get a rise out of me on the subject! But I think we managed to stay calm and measured in our response. We think people need to think this through a little bit – you might say it's all just a bit of fun, but at the same time, brands that sell themselves on sex are promoting a permissive culture, which, taken to the extremes, can put women in a vulnerable situation. Is it acceptable for a brand to expect their female employees to wear something that is very tight or very revealing?

How about the devil's advocate argument – men are also portrayed in an idealised way in the media. Why focus on women?

Thompson: Because nine out of 10 anorexia victims are women, globally. It's very gendered this disease. Men don't tend to measure themselves against men in terms of looks as much – there is a bigger dashboard of things they look at to measure success, but women – because we benchmark ourselves against size zero models in magazines – often think we're coming up short. In her latest book, Debora Spar [head of female-only Barnard College in the US] added up how much time she spends getting her hair and nails done, putting on makeup, and going to the gym – it came to something like five years of her life, compared with just a year spent on 'maintenance' by her husband. That's a big deficit if you think about it.

Will there ever be a time that we don't even need The Women's Foundation and similar groups?

Thompson: [Long pause] Many other countries have introduced quotas for they've just banned the use of ultra-skinny models – some people might say they're over-engineering, but I think the change has to come from somewhere. In Hong Kong, you have to ask where is the change going to come from? I think NGOs like ours will have a part to play for a little while yet.

TEDx Wan Chai Women Sun May 31, Hong Kong Arts Centre. 11am-6pm;
tedxwanchai.com. Due to overwhelming demand, registration is now closed.

For more information about The Women's Foundation, visit twfhk.org.

What is TED?

TED stands for Technology Entertainment Design. It's a non-profit and was originally set up in the US in 1984 as a series of short talks for people to share ideas and passions. It wasn't until 2006, when TED talks were first posted on the internet, that it rapidly became a global phenomenon.

So, what's TEDx?

TEDx talks are independently organised events that are held in the spirit of TED.

How do I get involved?

Sadly registration for TEDx Wan Chai Women is already full, but check tedxwanchai.com to keep up to date with all new TEDx Wan Chai events, from comedy to business seminars. Some are free, some are ticketed.

**For more even TEDx events in Hong Kong, check out TEDxHongKong (runs separately to TEDx Wan Chai).*

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