

PROFILE

‘HONG KONG HAS REACHED A CRITICAL POINT’

Leonie Ki, who believes people have to help themselves, is heading the government campaign to alleviate poverty

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“I will fight to my utmost for Hong Kong’s interests.” That’s the vow businesswoman Leonie Ki Man-fung utters when asked to explain her zeal in supporting government initiatives.

Ki’s latest act of public service is to oversee Bless Hong Kong, the government’s poverty-alleviation campaign.

Launched by the Commission on Poverty in February, the campaign aims to “help the underprivileged, foster the spirit of giving and boost the social mobility of young people”.

An advertising-industry veteran who rose to become an executive director of property giant New World Development, Ki has always believed the people of Hong Kong – a city she describes as a “blessed land” – must achieve prosperity by their own hard work, rather than by the government’s help.

“The reason I’m willing to [take up Bless Hong Kong] is because I’m worried about Hong Kong,” Ki says. “I believe Hong Kong has reached a critical point.”

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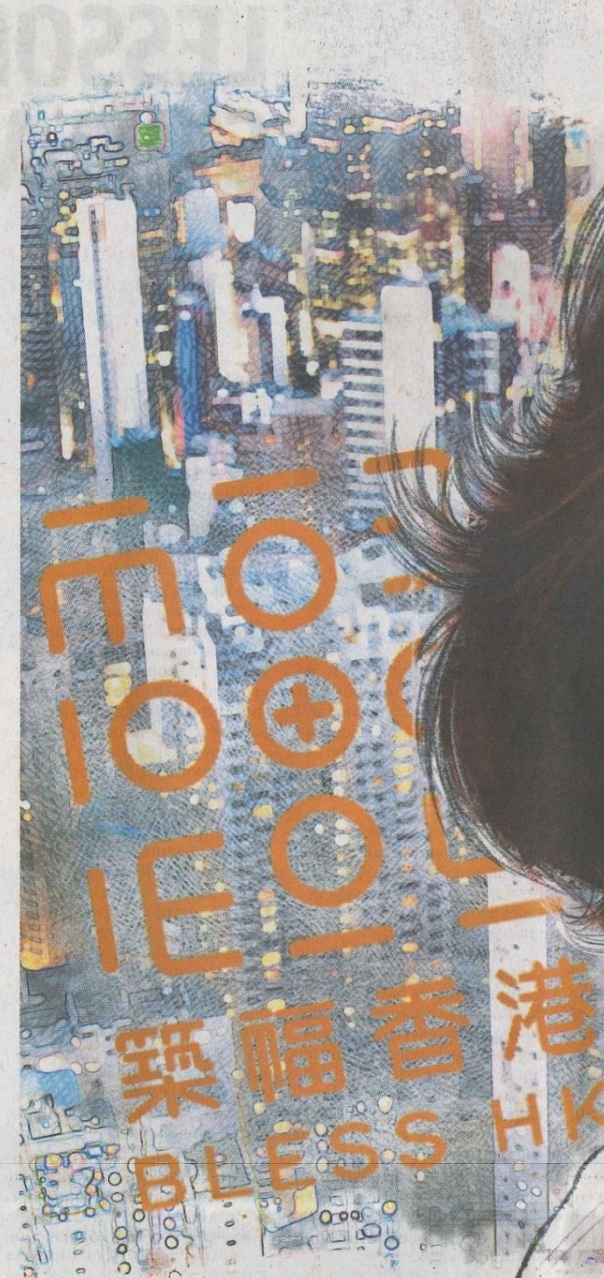
The decision to put her in charge of the campaign surprised many. However, her appointment was not just a reflection of her creative skills; she is also a long-term supporter of Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying and was a deputy director of his campaign team for the 2012 election.

Pan-democratic lawmakers question whether bringing the marketing industry veteran in to lead Bless Hong Kong is just a PR stunt to boost Leung’s popularity among the city’s poorer families.

Some allege that the appointment is Leung’s reward to New World’s boss Henry Cheng Kar-shun for making a last-ditch switch in the 2012 poll, dropping his support for Henry Tang Ying-yan, whom he had nominated, and joining Leung in time to celebrate his victory.

Ki brushes off such scepticism. “In fact, [the poverty commission] was chaired by Chief Secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor,” she says. “The chief executive didn’t know a thing before [my appointment].”

As someone with close ties to the administration but not part of it, Ki believes she is in a good position to judge the effects of the city’s political divisions on an administration she calls “very inclusive”.



Ki first dipped a toe into the political arena in 1995, a time when she was better known for coming up with the advertising slogan for local drinks brand Vita-soy – roughly translated as “Not simply a soft drink”.

Then, she took the helm of the Better Hong Kong Foundation which had a mission to promote the vision of a prosperous special administrative region to overseas media and politicians, two years before its creation.

She recounted in one of her books how Richard Boucher, the United States consul general in Hong Kong and now the deputy secretary general of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, repeatedly asked for a meeting at her office.

“I strongly resisted, as it [the request] was against protocol,” said Ki. But in the end she gave in and hosted a 90-minute visit from the US representatives.

“Soon after they left, I was on the alert and asked my colleagues to check if there were any bugs under the tables or attached to the carpet.”

The foundation was also responsible for handover celebrations, a task that put Ki in close contact with chief executive-to-be Tung Chee-hwa.

Exhausted by the workload, Ki at one point burst into tears in front of Tung.

“I couldn’t see any unity, so I couldn’t help but ... cry and tell Mr Tung, ‘I’m afraid Hongkongers are doomed under their own hands in future.’ Mr Tung calmed me down, saying, ‘No way, no way,’” she has written.

Tung’s immediate successor, Donald Tsang Yam-kuen, also sought her help through his aide, Norman Chan Tak-lam, now chairman of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority.

“One day when I was dining

Before 1992, I was another typical Hongkonger with a phobia of communism

with Normal Chan, he suddenly asked me to plan the 2008 Beijing Olympics torch relay,” Ki recalled. “That was only five days beforehand – and they had done nothing.”

In the end, thousands of Hongkongers dressed in red to watch the torch parade.

Her work with the city’s three chief executives comes despite an indifference to politics in her younger years.

And her attitude to the Communist Party – she encourages friends and young people she mentors to visit revolutionary sites – comes despite a youthful antipathy for the party.

One of her proudest achievements is helping create an exchange programme, set up with New World’s sponsorship in 1998, under which mainland officials attend Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. Vice-President Li Yuanchao (李源潮) was among the beneficiaries of the programme.

“Before 1992, I was another typical Hongkonger with a phobia of communism,” she once wrote. “From fear of having to adapt to acceptance ... I have been dedicated to understanding and communicating with [mainlanders] patiently.”

Now, aged in her sixties, she believes that the mainland’s miraculous economic develop-

ment deserves wider recognition among Hong Kong’s young people.

She also believes the next generation needs to strengthen their resolve.

“When we were young, we never waited for the government to do anything. We did it ourselves. What’s gone wrong nowadays is that there are people who only wait for the government to rescue them.”

She adds: “When did the British government ever pay attention to us? Never.” By contrast, the central government has offered Hong Kong many economic benefits, she says.

“What Hong Kong needs is not independence and autonomy,” she says. Rather, she believes, the city is hampered by a “needless” sense of inferiority, a sense that has become deeply rooted in a significant portion of the younger generation.

LEONIE KI

Education:
Bachelor of Arts, University of Hong Kong

Career:
Since 2002, member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Yunnan province.
This year, chairwoman for the “Bless Hong Kong” campaign.
Since 1997, managing director, New World China Enterprises Projects.
Since 2012, executive director, New World Development
1978-1995 Founder of Grey Advertising in Hong Kong and mainland China
1977-1978 Advertising officer for the Independent Commission Against Corruption