

# Altruism- the enigma of self interest

Dr. Thomas S.T. CHAN

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MB BS (HK) 1977

EMBA ( Kellogg-HKUST) 2001

PhD in Sociology 2007

(Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of  
Social Sciences)

# Introduction



- 19 year as a surgeon,
- past 14 years fulltime in humanitarian work.
- Worked and met with people who “sacrificed for others”
- Interest in sociology - why people do what they do

# Outline of talk:

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- Definition of Altruism
- Altruism today
- Development of Altruism in HKG
- Why – their explanation
- Looking ahead – The China challenge

# Our world today


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- Technological advances
- World of Globalization
- Highly competitive, knowledge based economy
- Opportunities for those with the right skills
- The rich accumulates vast wealth
- While the poor languish in dire situations

# Widening gap between the rich and poor



- *“Almost one person in five – 1.2 billion men, women and children – are currently living in a situation of extreme poverty, surviving on the equivalent of less than one dollar a day; half the people in the world are trying to manage below the poverty level of two dollars a day.” - UNDP*

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- **824 million people go hungry or have a precarious food supply;**
  - **500 million of them suffer from chronic malnutrition.**
  - **170 million children suffer from malnutrition,**
  - **more than 100 million never attend school,**
  - **230 million have no access to secondary education, and almost 250 million work to pay for their own needs and those of their families.**
  - **In the industrialised countries, more than 100 million people live below the income poverty line, 37 million are jobless, and more than 5 million people are homeless.**
  - **1.6 billion people in the world have no access to drinking water.**
  - **More than 840 million adults in the world are illiterate – 65% of them are women.**
  - **800 million people have no access to health care.**

# Altruism on the rise

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- Altruism is on the rise, and spreading.
- When there is need, some will act to respond
- Some of the most wealthy people gave away their fortune .
- Many well-educated and privileged chose not to pursue material wealth, but spend their lives serving the needy
- influencing social norms and mobilizing communities to follow the lead.

# Why?

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- Baffled many
- Law of the jungle - survival of the fittest
- Zero sum game
- Assumption that self interest and the interest of others do not mix
- Shall explore this issue
- The best answers come from those who serve sacrificially

# Isidore Auguste Marie François Xavier Comte 1798-1857

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One of the founders of Sociology

Doctrine of Positivism



# *Defining Altruism:-*

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- In 1851, French philosopher Auguste Comte coined the word *altruisme* .
- Two years later it entered the English language as *altruism*.  
[Italian: altrui others]

# Definition : **Altruism**

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- *Self-sacrifice for the benefit of others.*  
*Comte*
- Selfless concern for the welfare of others;  
the opposite of selfishness. *Wikipedia*
- *Behaviour that promotes the survival  
chances of others at a cost to ones own.*  
*Altruists.org*

# Enigma :

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- Self Vs Others
- Theory of Evolution – survival of the fittest
- Capitalism – zero sum game
- What if we frame it differently?
  - self and others are not mutually exclusive
  - benevolent acts are in one's own interest
- *“Gains” in selfless behaviour*
- *Non-materialistic, Psychological / spiritual nature*

# Abraham Harold Maslow (1908 –1970)

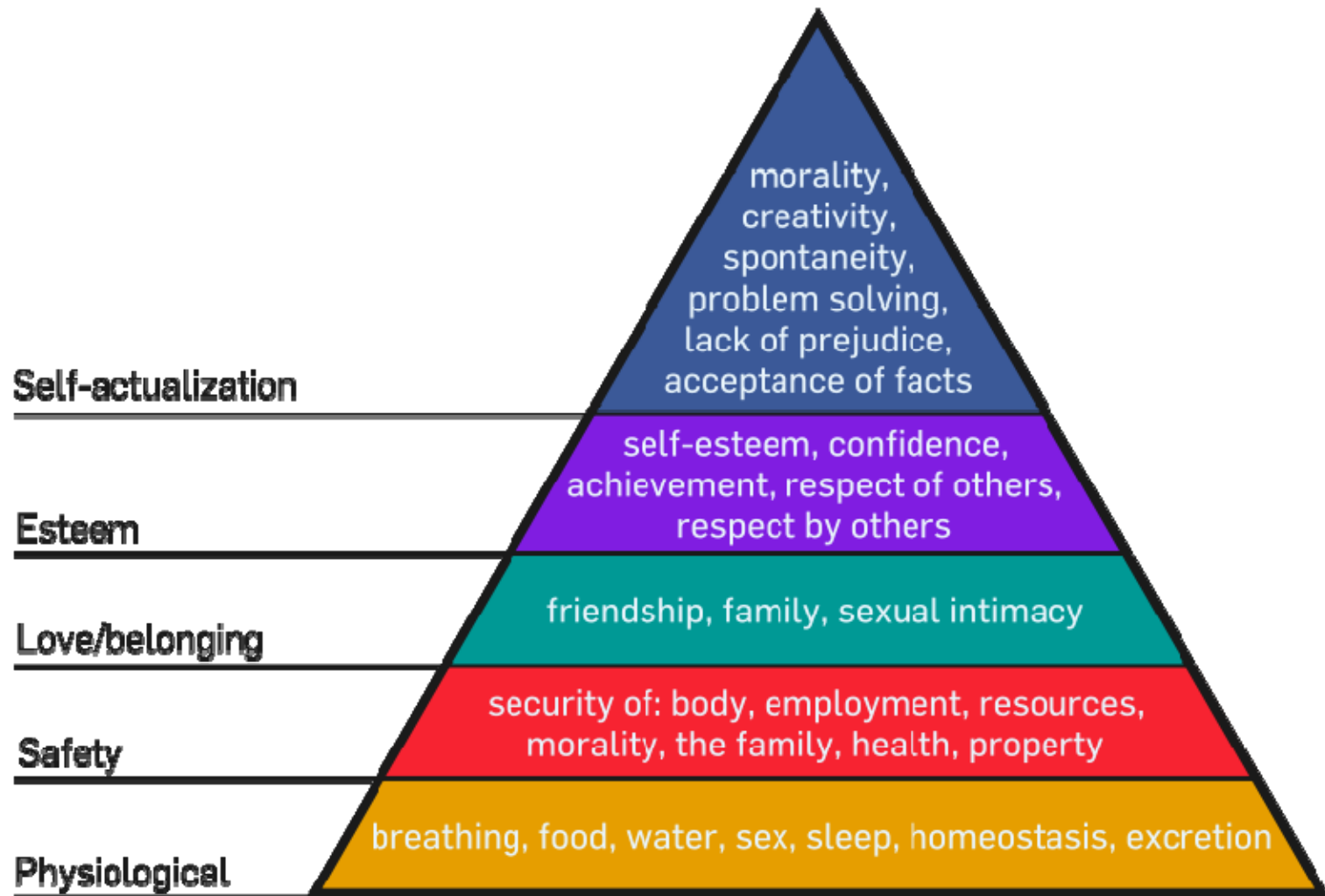
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- Founder of humanistic psychology
- 1943 paper – *A Theory of Human Motivation*



# The hierarchy of needs:

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# A matter of definition

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- *“Self-actualization” - universal human need*
- *After one’s basic needs are satisfied*
- *Motivation - what one sees as one’s mission in life*
- *One’s Worldview determines his action*

# Why selfless sacrifice?

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- Tracing the development of altruistic activities in HK
- From observations and interactions
- Best answer comes from those who practice it

# Development of Altruism in Hong Kong:

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- Where East meets West
- Traditional Chinese culture mixes with Western values
- Embrace the principle of individualism upon which Western humanitarian movement was based
- Famous for its entrepreneurial spirit
- Hard working, ingenuity, vibrant economy
- Getting rich is glorious, materialistic
- The other side of Hong Kong - development of an altruistic spirit over the years

# Factors underlining this development:-

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- Government's role:-
  - Tax exemptions
  - Promotions e.g. volunteerism, relief fund,
  - CIIF promoting social capital
- NGO efforts
- Media
- Examples
- Social Norm

# Evidence of the altruistic movement:-

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- Giving become a matter of habit
- Even in bad economic times
- Growth of Volunteerism
- Growth of NGOs / charities
- Spontaneous acts by individuals
- Sacrificial examples

# Charitable donations in HK

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- Steady growth over the past years
- Community as a whole, 2009 tax exempted donations HK\$ 7 billion
- As of 31 March 2009, HK has 5,898 tax exempted charities
- Growth of charities in that year alone - 621

# Charitable donation in Hong Kong:-



<b>Charitable donations exempted from tax (\$billion)</b>	<b>1997-98</b>	<b>2005-06</b>	<b>2006-07</b>	<b>2007-08</b>
<b>Amounts allowed under Profits tax</b>		<b>1.79</b>	<b>2.15</b>	<b>2.51</b>
<b>Amounts allowed under Salaries tax</b>		<b>3.4</b>	<b>3.76</b>	<b>4.52</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.66</b>	<b>5.19</b>	<b>5.91</b>	<b>7.03</b>

# Charitable donation in Hong Kong:-



- Does not include all :
  - Direct donations to the needy
  - Donation to charities not registered / overseas
  - “Small change” donations
  - Donations exceeding the allowed percentage

# Donation in Hong Kong as a whole

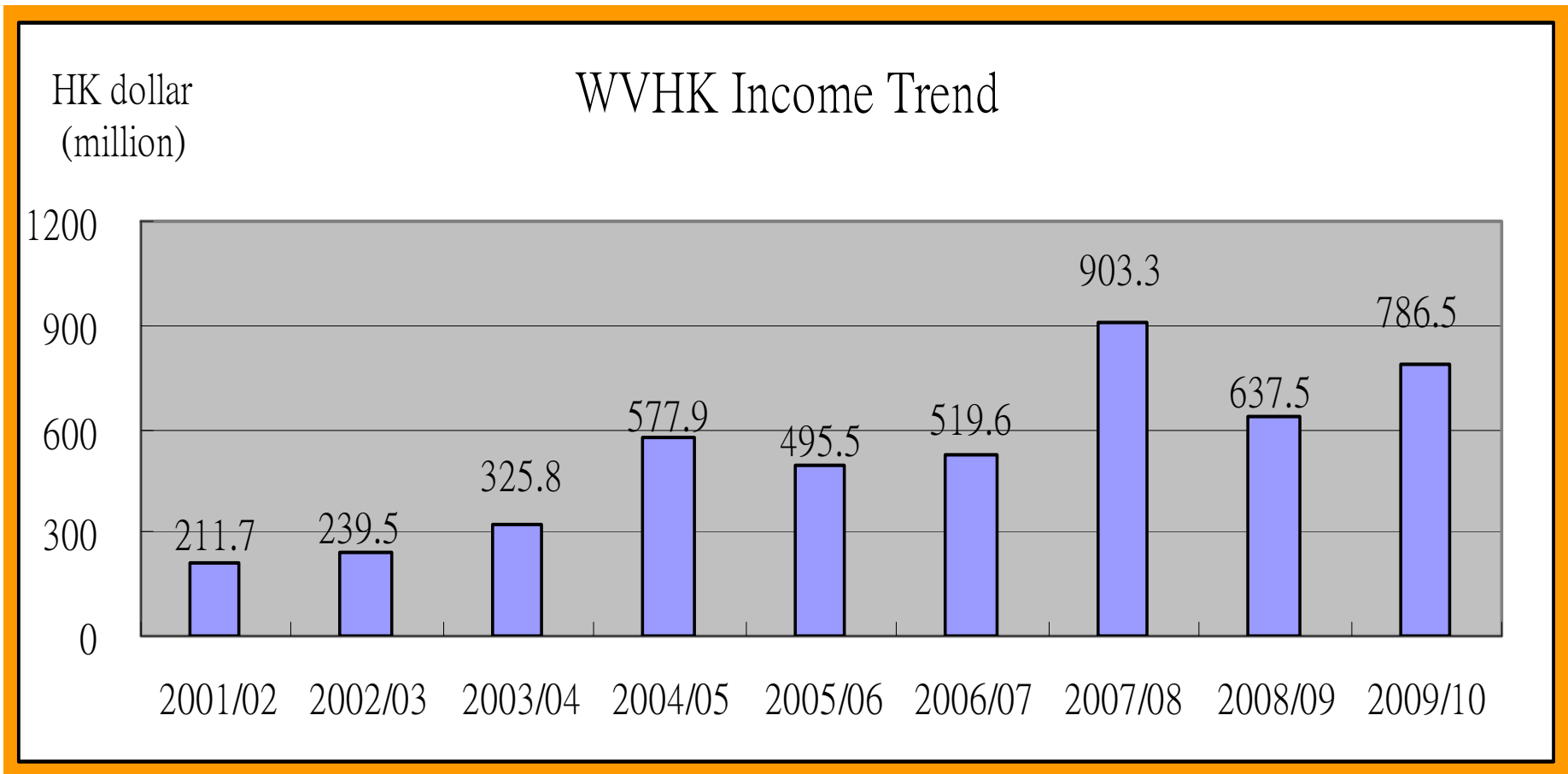


## Government policy :-

- Percentage of taxable income exempted

2003/04	10%
2004/05	25%
2009/10	35%
- Individual donors Vs Corporate donors

# donation income for WVHK



# Donation for emergence relief



- Example 2005, South Asia Tsunami
- Death toll exceeded 200,000
- HK donated 700 million in a matter of weeks
- Average HK\$100 per citizen

# Top of Eastern Asia

	World Giving Index (ranking)	% of giving money	% volunteer ing time	% helping a stranger
HK	18	70	13	50
Mongolia	67	33	31	32
Taiwan	72	37	15	41
Korea	81	27	22	38
Japan	119	17	23	25
China	147	11	42	8

Source – World Giving Index 2010, Charities Aid Foundation International

# Volunteerism



- Government figures Nov 2010:-
- 2,100 NGOs conducting volunteer services
- Among them registered volunteers 930,000
- Maximum hours of volunteer service 2,700 hour
- Longest duration of service - 25 years
- Last year alone, 38,000 members of the Agency for Volunteer Service provided 700,000 hours of service.
- Economic value of HK\$ 5.5 billion

*Source – Agency of Volunteer Service*

# Taking Risks

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- Serving in poor and remote regions brings risks, and volunteers know it.
- Traveling in remote mountainous regions with poor infrastructure
- serving in conflict zones and during natural disasters like earthquake zone with aftershocks.
- Unknown to the public eye
- Hundreds, if not thousand, chose to work in remote backward parts of under-developed places

# Examples (1) : Development workers

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- World Vision Development Projects in China
- Project managers – mature, well-educated ethnic Chinese
- Live and work in the field
- Around 40 in number
- Why? No fame, no fortune. Hardship.

# Reasons given:-

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- Christian faith
- Being blessed, want to give back
- Love their country
- See China developed
- Happy and satisfied
- Eternal reward

## Examples (2) Dr. YM Tse

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- Early 2003 SARS epidemic started
- Not one medical personnel deserted duty. Many volunteered to serve in the frontline.
- Dr Tse, a medical officer in Tuen Men Hospital, volunteered to the acute ward treating SARS patients
- Infected as she intubated a SARS patient
- **“It was the most natural thing to do”**

## (3) Volunteer- Mr. Wong Fuk Wing

- Driver, 45 years old diabetic patient
- Read and moved by a Chinese cancer pt who raised money for leukemia
- 2002 raised money by walking to BJ; 2,800 Km in 83 days
- 2008 Sichuan quake  
“cannot just sit here, must go.  
It is the right thing to do”.



# Volunteer Wong Fuk Wing



- Helping orphans in Qinghai Yushu county
- Like many other citizens, low profile, has been doing this for long time, un-noticed
- Qinghai Earthquake – died as he went back into collapsing orphanage trying to save others
- **“dying while serving others is the biggest blessing”**

## (4) Volunteer- Tsang Man Kit

- 30s,
- Father of 2



# Volunteer- Tsang Man Kit



- Businessman in BJ, serving children
- Set up own group helping children
- Qinghai Earthquake victims without warm clothes for the winter
- 2nd trips in as many months in September Oct
- Late October died from car accident while delivering supplies
- **“I hope my action will influence those around me, and subsequently through them influence the whole of society”.**

## (5) Liver Donor- Hui Sai Man

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- A custom officer injured on duty, need liver donation urgently.
- 80 citizens responded
- Fellow customs officer best match and became live donor
- **“I don’t have a family”**
- **“Do not treat me like a hero. I am just doing what other citizen would do”.**

# Why?



Diverse reasons:-

- Religious Faith –
- Moral Call of duty, Confucius values
- Humanitarian ideals
- Patriotism

# Common themes

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- Not one-off, passion of the moment acts
- Sustained over years, serving time and again.
- Often followed the initiation of a leader / NGO
- Spontaneously, loss organization
- “Satisfaction” in helping others, “Joy”; “Happiness”; Self-actualization”
- “the natural thing to do”

# Is there self-interest?

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- used many words to communicate the motivation behind
- not looking for glory / limelight
- low Key, shy from the limelight
- “we are more blessed in giving than receiving”

# The enigma?

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- To the altruist, there is no enigma
- They do what they see as logical
- Not seeking fame or fortune, not even attention
- They see no sacrifice, only blessing
- To society at large, these people are sacrificing their money, time and even lives.... without asking for any return
- To them, “ It is just the natural thing to do”

# Is that self interest?

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- Personal satisfaction
- doing the right thing
- In their value system, perfectly logical and natural.
- Many have a vision, to influence others
- Many wish to see a better nation, China
- A vision shared by many in our community

# Challenges ahead

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- Long road ahead
- China has emerged strong economic power
- Still extreme poverty, also in spirit WGI 147
- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences recent research: donation per capita HK\$ 29
- Compared with US HK\$7,720 ; India HK\$48.
- Much remains to be done in public education
- Government policy towards NGO

# Conclusion – the enigma

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- Perhaps when we all see as they see,
- Seek what they seek,
- this world will be a better place,
- regardless of race, religion or creed.

THANK YOU





# Altruism

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- Enigma – apparent or real?
- A matter of definition and world view

## *Our World Today:-*


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- ***“In a world of plenty, man's struggle is not for survival but for meaning. As shown by the rise in volunteer work worldwide, people want to help other people.”***

# Speaking from:

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- Personal experience and reflections
- Colleagues, fellow workers / volunteers
- Partners, counterparts of the Chinese government

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- Love and compassion are components of all forms of Buddhism
  - Still, the very notion of altruism is modified in such a world-view, since the belief is that such a practice promotes our own happiness:



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