

## Executive Summary

Many governments around the world award their citizens honours for public or community service, outstanding achievement and sustained contribution to society. This is meant to convey both distinction and recognition and is usually regarded as the highest form of honour for citizenry. There is widespread belief that the presentation of merit-based government honours to individuals helps establish role models for society, encourage greater involvement in public service, and develop a greater sense of belonging. All of these contribute to social stability and good governance in the long run.

Honours are given to people from all walks of life, and therefore the public perception of its credibility of the system is of particular concern. A continuous review of the system also helps to keep it in line with developments in society.

In Hong Kong, the Grand Bauhinia Medal (GBM) is the highest award under the HKSAR honours and awards system. Others include the Order of the Bauhinia Star, the Order of the Medal of Honour, the Chief Executive's Commendation, etc. Nominations for honours and awards are normally made by bureaux and departments. Non-government organisations and the public can submit nominations as well. The Chief Executive approves nominations for honours and awards based on the recommendation of the Honours and Non-official Justices of the Peace Selection Committee (Selection Committee). As of 2018, more than 6,000 honours had been awarded.

Yet, it seems that there is no direct link between the system and the daily life of the general public, while citizens are not familiar with how the system operates. Some recipients have been controversial. It is therefore worth studying how to improve the system, with the hope of creating a more positive environment for the governance of the HKSAR Government.

The honours and awards system of the HKSAR has been established for more than 20 years. This research study aims at understanding the views and values of the general public in Hong Kong towards the system. The study also makes reference to overseas experiences and has sought views from local academics and experts. It is also hoped that this study will put forward practicable measures to advance the operation of the system, in particular the

opportunities for public participation and the improvement of public confidence in the system.

In conducting this research, data was collected through related overseas literature reviews, an on-site survey of 522 Hong Kong-based citizens in March 2019, and exclusive research interviews with four academics and experts, as well as one awardee throughout February and March 2019.

## Main Discussion

- 1. The honours and awards system of the HKSAR has been established for more than 20 years, with respondents holding a positive attitude on its values. The Government and all sectors of society should work together to protect and strengthen the prestige and significance of the system.**

This research study showed that an overwhelming majority (95.2%) of the 522 respondents considered it an important issue for a government to award people with honours for their contribution to society. Another high percentage (91.0%) admitted that they would be proud if they were given an honour from the government. A significant percentage (79.5%) revealed that a credible honours and awards system would enhance their support of the HKSAR Government.

Over the past 20+ years, more than 6,000 honours had been awarded. During an exclusive interview, an expert said that the aggregated contribution made by the awardees was priceless, and the influence of it on society could not be calculated purely in terms of economic benefits.

The respondents appreciated the values of the system. The Government and all sectors of society should work together to protect and strengthen the prestige and significance of it.

- 2. Honours are awarded to eligible people from all walks of life, and therefore it is intrinsically a matter of public importance. The**

**Government should pay attention to the public's perceptions of the recipients. Securing the trust and/or support of the public is key for the success of the system.**

Of the 369 respondents who have heard of the honours and awards system of the HKSAR, 58% (57.6%) said those receiving honours from the Government deserved the honours. 37% (37.1%), however, said recipients did not live up to their titles.

People have their own views regarding who should be awarded or not. During an exclusive interview, an expert said that very often the honours list involved subjectivity, which made controversy over the list inevitable. Worse still, the general public did not have a deep understanding about the fields of the awardees. These indicate some of the reasons why the general public have reservations when it comes to evaluating whether the awardees deserved their honours.

The basic rationale for the establishment of an honours system is to provide recognition of the contribution to society by members of the public. The Government should therefore pay attention to the perceptions of the public regarding the awardees, and the key for the success of the system is securing the trust and/or support of the public.

- 3. There are two major drawbacks regarding public participation in the honours system. Ensuring the public's involvement with, and accessibility to, the system would be a way to advance the honours and awards system of the HKSAR.**

Many governments around the world emphasize public participation in the honours system, and measures were introduced to help and encourage citizens to make nominations.

In Hong Kong, any person could be the nominator or the nominee. To make a nomination, there is no need for a nominator to complete a nomination form. Also, there is no restriction on the structure or presentation of the nomination letter. Without clear guidelines or a nomination form, it is not easy for an ordinary citizen to prepare or write a nomination letter. This might impede the motivation of the general public to make a nomination.

In addition, people who make contributions but have a low profile, or a small personal network are not going to be easily known or identified by the public. While they might have touching life stories, their chance of being nominated will be limited.

It is worth making the effort to ensure public accessibility to the system, and improving the opportunities of being nominated for those who make contributions but stay un-known in the community.

**4. The Selection Committee plays an important role in considering the nomination and the award class. There is room for improvement in the composition and the replacement of its members.**

Experience from overseas show that there are representatives of the community involved in specialist committees (like arts and media or sport). The committees examine nominations from the public, government departments and others before the lists are sent to the upper tier for further consideration.

In Hong Kong, the former "Honours Committee" considered nominations and made recommendations for honours or awards to individuals. For the current Selection Committee<sup>1</sup>, one of its terms of reference is to consider nominations and make recommendations to the Chief Executive for honours and awards. Two Sub-committees assist the Selection Committee. They are: the Minor Honours Sub-committee (Civil Servants); the Minor Honours Sub-committee (General Public).

This research study noted that six of the eight non-official members of the Selection Committee have been serving the Committee for six consecutive years. Given the "6-6 Rules" guideline<sup>2</sup>, this study is concerned about the appointment of the non-official members for the new term. It is necessary

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<sup>1</sup> The Government in December 2013 announced the establishment of the Honours and Non-official Justices of the Peace Selection Committee, which was tasked to consider nominations for various honours as well as for appointments as Non-official Justices of the Peace (JPs) and make recommendations to the Chief Executive. It replaced the Honours Committee and the Non-official JPs Selection Committee.

<sup>2</sup> The "6-6 Rules" implies that each person appointed to the advisory and statutory bodies (ASBs) should not hold more than six such public offices at any one time and should not serve on a body in the same capacity for more than six years.

to balance continuity while bringing in new members.

For the Minor Honours Sub-committee (General Public), currently all of its members are made up of government officials. Without representatives from the general public, it inevitably raises worries about if the nominations submitted by the public be able to receive well attention or consideration in the Sub-committee. There is a pressing need to enrich the composition of the members to expand the perspective of the Sub-committee.

**5. Hong Kong is a diverse society. Each sector has people with outstanding and excellent achievement. It is worth studying how to reflect the characteristic diversity of the city in the honour lists amidst a complicated and ever-changing environment.**

Asked about which part of the honours and awards system of the HKSAR that they most admired, two-thirds (66.7%) of those who have heard of the system, referred to any person has a chance to be awarded regardless of his or her background.

However, based on the citations of the award recipients of the Order of the Grand Bauhinia, Order of the Bauhinia Star (Gold, Silver, Bronze), and Order of the Medal of Honour, this research study noted that many were awarded for taking-up government offices, or were related to their official positions. Academics in the exclusive interviews part of this research queried the need to give such awards (As providing good quality service and maintaining effective governance was the obligation and responsibility of officials). They also worried that the fairness of the system might be damaged if this kind of award becomes a usual practice.

In addition, some respondents (10.5%) of the survey revealed that from their point of view, the system's credibility would be hampered if there were widespread speculation that an award was granted as merely a political favour.

Since Hong Kong is a diverse society, it could negatively impact the credibility of the system if the public has the impression that there is a close linkage between the award and the officials' positions or political favour. It

is worth studying how to reflect the diversity of the city in the honour lists given the city's complicated and ever-changing environment.

- 6. Sufficient information and continuous promotional work can help people fairly evaluate the system. The HKSAR Government has the responsibility to help the public develop a basic knowledge or understanding of the system.**

This research study noted that 40% (39.3%) of the respondents considered the lack of public knowledge is the biggest inadequacy of the system, while 27% (27.1%) referred to the non-comprehensiveness of the information. Yet more than 75% (75.5%) expressed interest in knowing more about the honours' recipients.

Information collected by this study via enquiry to the relevant department of the Government, noted that the only statistics related to the HKSAR's honours and awards system that the Government has gathered, was the number of honours awarded since its inception in 1997. Enquiries about programmes or activities educating the public about the system were not answered before the deadline of this research report.

The HKSAR Government has a clear duty to help the public become familiar with the system. This could enable people to constructively and fairly evaluate the system and minimize unnecessary speculation.

## **Recommendations**

The intended aim of this study is to put forward possible measures that could advance the operation of the system, in particular its openness and accessibility by the public, with the hope of creating a more encouraging environment for the governance of the HKSAR. With the findings and discussions above, this study proposes the following recommendations:

- 1. Provide nomination forms and nomination guidelines to assist the public nominating a person worthy of an award in a more convenient and practical way.**

With reference to overseas experience, we recommend the Government provide nomination forms with clear nomination guidelines. This could assist the public to nominate people more conveniently and practically. In turn this would also increase the chance of nominating those who lack a large network but significantly contribute to the community.

**2. Enrich the diversity of the Minor Honours Sub-committee (General Public) by adding ordinary members of the public from different fields to make the selection work more representative.**

The Minor Honours Sub-committee (General Public) is one of the two sub-committees in assisting the Selection Committee. Yet its members are government officials. With reference to overseas experience, we recommend the Government appoint members of the public from different fields to the Sub-committee. This could enable the Sub-committee to have a more balanced and independent perspective and make the selections more representative.

**3. Improve the transparency of the honours and awards system.**

Sufficient and accurate information could help improve the public's support of the system. This is also a basic measure for improving the transparency of any system. The Government should:

3.1 Start collecting all relevant statistics as early as possible with an analytical base and regularly publish the data to the public.

3.2 Implement a continuous program of public education to help citizens understand the meaning of the awards, the operations of the system, the criteria for being nominated, etc.

**4. Deepen the influence of the recipients through their life stories or experiences for inspiration. This could become part of a documentary and help develop a set of human values with Hong Kong characters.**

We recommend the Government invite some recipients to share their experiences. This could become part of a documentary about Hong Kong history. In the long run, it is hoped that human values such as altruism and participating in public affairs, with Hong Kong characters would be developed and promoted.