

# THE PEAK

HONG KONG

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**JIM THOMPSON**  
PHILANTHROPY  
THAT RUNS IN THE FAMILY





THE PEAK INTERVIEW

# CROWNING MOMENTS

Building a business from scratch and keeping it privately held has given Jim Thompson the chance to be true to his nature and become a generous philanthropist.

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CLOTHES TIE AND JACKET FROM ERMENEGILDO ZEGNA





“FOR SOME REASON – AND IT BLEW MY MIND – THIS GUY’S FAMILY SAID THEY DIDN’T THINK ASIA WAS THE PLACE TO BE IN BUSINESS, SO THEY WANTED ME TO BUY OUT THEIR SHARES”

When good fortune does you a favour, you owe it to the world around you to repay that debt. That seems to be the personal ethos of James E Thompson, the founder and chairman of Crown Worldwide Group – and a man widely regarded as one of the kindest men in Hong Kong business. In person, Thompson speaks freely and smiles easily.

The main story about the beginning of Crown Worldwide is well known: with a relatively small sum of money in 1965, a bold young American entrepreneur started a small relocation company that would become Crown. But it all came about, in some ways, initially from an act of desperation.

In 1965, Thompson was in Japan and out of a job. His degree in aeronautical engineering, recently completed at San Jose State University, was of little real interest to him. After spending a year backpacking the globe in the early 1960s, the young Thompson was far more interested in culture and history.

He had arrived in Japan and taken a job with a small company that provided moving services for US military families – the US government used private contractors for such work. Thompson was more interested in learning Japanese language and history. And though he cringes a little now at the memory, Thompson says that his big aim was to discover the actual origins of the Japanese people, which he maintains are still not fully known.

The company he was working for wound up having to downsize, leaving him out of a job. At that point, Thompson’s options were to either go back to the US and try his hand at aeronautical engineering – something that he “never had the heart for” – or find a way to keep

going. So he formed his own moving company (though Thompson now characterises the move as “illogical”).

That “illogical” move proved fortuitous, as it put Thompson on a long road to business success. After a period of five years of building up his company in Japan, Thompson met another young expatriate entrepreneur in Asia who wanted to set up something similar in Hong Kong. “I was getting to the point where everything was stable, so I said, ‘Let’s go.’” The pair built up the company, and from 1970 to 1978, added service locations in Southeast Asia, including Singapore and Malaysia. Then came another piece of interesting fortune.

“For some reason – and it blew my mind – this guy’s family said they didn’t think Asia was the place to be in business, so they wanted me to buy out their shares – that was between ’78 and ’80,” says Thompson. The money to buy out his partner wasn’t readily available, but Thompson was just able to manage it. By that time, the Hong Kong office was now the centre of all the legal, accounting and financial operations of Crown. With the departure of his partner’s representative from the business, Thompson moved to Hong Kong for good.

He then grew Crown into a range of businesses that took advantage of Asia’s rise as an economic powerhouse, presaging the growth of globalisation.

Through organic growth and acquisitions, Crown has diversified into business records management, fine arts shipping and storage, and logistics. Most recently, Crown established a new World Mobility division, which manages global talent for multinational corporations.

Perhaps most famously to Hong Kong’s wealthier residents, Crown also owns the Crown Wine Cellars, which is a members’ club and storage facility for wine lovers built into a

World War II-era munitions bunker on the south side of Hong Kong Island. Thompson says that in the process of finding his ideal spot for wine storage, he wound up touring a number of old tunnels dug into Hong Kong Island. The road to getting this done had its “ups and downs”, but few would argue with the result.

#### GREEN LIGHTED

Thompson has chosen to put his company, still privately held, to good use beyond the acquisition of wealth. For him, social responsibility is key. “I flashed a big green light to all our branches around the world and I said, ‘You all have the right, as far as the company is concerned, to go out and raise money for the charity of your choice.’ And it really took off. This is something that, in Hong Kong, is probably not really known that well,” he says.

That big green light was the beginning of a relatively decentralised approach to corporate social responsibility – one that Thompson believes has plenty of business value as well as being a force for good in the community. “I want them [Crown employees] to have ownership of the local fundraising. And I also want them to be involved. And that’s where a lot of businesses don’t realise the benefits,” Thompson says.

In his view, it is this ownership of CSR that gives the staff in Crown’s disparate offices and companies (it now has 265 offices in 60 countries) the cohesiveness that leads to success in other areas of the business.

“I think one of the things I’ve personally learned is how much most people want to do it (CSR) in a business,” Thompson says. “Once a company says, ‘It’s in our interest, let’s go do it’, you always find a spark-plug type person who starts organising things.”

Those things could be bicycle





aces or charity cook-offs. Recently, Crown staff climbed to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro to raise money for children's charities. An intranet connects all of Crown's offices, with staff posting events they've organised and amounts raised.

Thompson's son and daughter are both working in the business. His New York-based daughter, Jennifer Harvey, is the global director for CSR. This arrangement, Thompson admits, is a little by design.

"I wanted it [the CSR commitment] to be built into the next generation. In fact, she [Harvey] now has a daughter, and when we were building schools in Cambodia, I made sure that both she and her daughter came out to experience all these kids getting a new school or a new library, and how they reacted, and how much it meant to them," says Thompson.

This aspect of the CSR experience is as much about succession planning as it is giving. "I feel that by having my daughter so committed to this – which she really is – and then having her daughter seeing that part of the world – I feel that as the company goes past me, this feeling of philanthropy and giving back will continue," he says. In the latest Sustainability Report from Crown, Jennifer Harvey announced that, for the first time, Crown would be using global standards for its CSR work.

Education has been a long-term concern for Thompson, and not in any abstract way. His father, who he admires, had to make his own way in the world with little education, owing to the fact that his grandfather had abandoned the family. Nonetheless, with an eighth grade education, the elder Thompson joined the navy and worked his way up to become a full commander. Education was the key to getting ahead, and being self-educated was the only way. According to Jim Thompson, there

were no great life lessons from his father, only examples to follow.

"Because of his own struggles with education, he really wanted us [Thompson and his sister] to get it," he says. "Unfortunately, my sister got married at 17; it was a disaster. But she was smarter than me and she never went to university. I was the first in my family, on my mother's and father's sides, who got a college education. I think my father lived a little of that through me.

"After I got the aeronautics degree, I went into the air force for a little while and learned to fly light planes. Then I put all my energies into going ... to Asia," he says. He ended up in Japan, where his father has been deployed.

#### CHEQUEBOOK PHILANTHROPY?

For Thompson, personal philanthropy is about much more than simply signing cheques. Cambodia is often a target for his giving, because he feels it is lagging in the region, due in part to the fact it was the last Asian country to really see the end of war and the establishment of some political stability. Quick to shy away from politics, Thompson nonetheless feels that even stability you don't necessarily like is preferable to chaos and war.

The fact that Crown is privately held makes it easier (than for a listed company) to set up CSR policies and philanthropic activities, though Thompson is quick to point out there are plenty of listed firms doing good CSR work.

Four years ago, Thompson, with the help of his daughter, set up the Crown Foundation, which he hopes will eventually become a sustainable source of funds for selected charities and applicants in Hong Kong. "You have to set up the right kind of formula. Eventually, there's enough money that does this. It's not huge right now, but it's growing. I'm leaning



CLOTHES TIE AND JACKET FROM ERMENGILDO ZEGNA

towards letting my daughter manage it," he says.

All the legal framework for the Crown Foundation has been set up, and at the moment it's a matter of determining future direction. If Thompson has his way (which he likely will), the focus of the foundation will be education and children's aid. "I do a lot of mentoring for university students [in Hong Kong]. I have mentored some for years. I love talking to these kids – they often need someone who isn't a parent to guide them."

Giving to a community is something that Thompson has continually tried to do in his time in Hong Kong. That has not always been successful. But handling tough spots in life and staying optimistic is one of the keys to success. Thompson is a member of a loose association of businessmen and



**ABOVE**  
Crown Worldwide chairman Jim Thompson is building a foundation to continue his good works.

**CLOCKWISE ON RIGHT PAGE**  
Jim Thompson (back, far left) in Cambodia for a school opening in 2009. Thompson's son, Jimmy, is third from left, back row. Sally Thompson is back row second from right and Jennifer Harvey in front row, right side; setting out to travel the world in 1961, Thompson is on the right; in Japan in the early 1960s.



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professionals called Vision 2047, a think tank which aims to help push forward a debate on the long-term future of Hong Kong. Thompson remains characteristically optimistic about this, citing the fundamentals of Hong Kong's economic success – the legal system, the tax system and the laissez-faire approach to new businesses – that he reckons will remain.

Ironically, for someone so focused on the importance of education, Thompson can also betray the sense that sometimes it's only after school is done that you really get to know yourself and what you can do. "I was a B-/C+ student in university. The education is important, but the reality is, you don't know what you're capable of until you get out there," he says. "When I graduated from San Jose State, I was scared. Then you just go out and compete and you find out."

Two years ago, Thompson received a delegation from his old alma mater for a lunch meeting. He expected that they had come looking for donations. Instead, they asked if he would deliver the commencement address. He wound up delivering the same message of positive thinking to the class of new graduates from what is, by most standards, an average university (ranked 345 out of 650 by Forbes). But that didn't matter – it's all about the possibilities that lay in front of you.

To this day, Thompson remains as fascinated with history as he was when he first struck out on his own in the 1960s. Touring the Crown Wine Cellars, you get the feeling that he would only build such a wine storage place if it could be built into a historic spot.

He describes a new manor house that he and his wife are restoring in a small village in Ireland, and how he has taken to discovering the ancestral history of the house. Ever good-natured, he may wind up funding a school there as well. ④

Fascinated by history, Thompson is currently restoring a manor home in Ireland.



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