

Mr. Wu Ho-su's Life and Ethics

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The surname of the gentleman being memorialized was Wu and his personal name was Ho-su. For generations his family lived in Hsinchu, Taiwan. His impoverished family could not afford to send him to elementary school until he was nine. Walking barefoot several miles to and from school every day, his toenails were broken by the stones on the road. Although difficult to endure, such hardship enhanced his discipline to excel. His father's personal name was Hua, a road construction laborer who became disabled when an upper leg was crushed in an accident and soon contracted tuberculosis; thus having to rely heavily on the wife's help to provide for the family's livelihood, his father struggled hard to send him to school. Following his father's example, Mr. Wu Ho-su was able to face adversities like these without flinching. He was unusually intelligent and studied diligently. Being particularly skilled at using the abacus to make calculations, he became the top student in his entire class; however, because his clothing was tattered, the teacher, a Japanese national, lowered his standing to second place. Thus, in his youth Mr. Wu deeply felt his native country's humiliation and suffering, for he was born 25 years after Japan had forcefully seized control of Taiwan and the Pescadores following its 1895 defeat of China.

After Graduating from elementary school, he studied business by working as an apprentice at Hirano's Store, This store in Taipei was a Japanese owned cloth business. Beginning at dawn, he worked diligently, industriously, and twice as hard as his fellow laborers. Without stopping to rest, he even continued to improve himself by studying bookkeeping at night. When he was 19, he privately drafted his future business plans, which were both meticulously detailed and ambitious; moreover, when Ogawa Mitsusada, the manager at Hirano's, read the plans, he exclaimed that Mr. Wu was an exceptional talent. The following year, Ogawa invested the capital to establish the Ogawa Company as a separate company and made Mr. Wu the co-manager with a 10 percent share of the profits; thus, Mr. Wu's rapid rise began with this opportunity. Even though he was the youngest of the dozen or so persons in the company, Mr. Wu's responsibilities were the most arduous, and he had to travel extensively throughout southern Taiwan and Japan's large cities. Because most of those who sold cloth as their occupation in southern Taiwan at the time were good merchants, Mr. Wu benefited from many mentors, and his skills improved daily. For the next several years during the last stages of World War II, the cloth business was particularly hard hit by shortages. However, because Mr. Wu had a profound understanding of the principle that accumulated efforts eventually can lead to a breakthrough, Ogawa's company unexpectedly surpassed others in the cloth trade, and Mr. Wu gradually became a middle-class merchant.

When Taiwan returned to our Chinese domain in 1945, Mr. Wu established the Shinkong Company in Taipei, and his independent business operations thus began. Never forgetful of his

hometown and always mindful of the source of his resources, Mr. Wu named Shinkong by combining two characters (and pronouncing them in his own dialect): the first from his hometown, Hsinchu; and from Ogawa Mitsusada, he selected the first half of his old boss' personal name. Some have asked him: "Didn't the two characters of the company's name come from the patriotic phrase, 'a new people and recovered nation' (Hsin-min Kuang-fu)?" Smiling, Mr. Wu would reply: "That, too, was my intent." During the early years after the Retrocession, Taiwan only had cloth businesses, but no textile industry because the principal industries at the time were monopolized by the government. Industry and Mining, as well as Cement, Agriculture & Forestry, and Pulp & Paper were altogether called the "four state corporations," and the textiles were included therein. Furthermore, foreign exchange was controlled, and non-government companies were prohibited from importing machinery. After Shanghai's leading textile industrialists crossed the sea to seek refuge, transporting their factory machinery with them to Taiwan, private industries began to arise slowly. As a cloth merchant, Mr. Wu set his aspirations on the textile industry at this time; moreover, although he was at a competitive disadvantage, he never became dispirited. Mr. Wu first established a tea factory in Miaoli; however, sensing that the tea business would become depressed, he decided to change his line of business. Thus, in 1951, he established a dyeing and spinning factory in Hsinchu. This was harbinger of Taiwan's man-made fiber industry. A year later, his operations had expanded, and he incorporated them into his Shinkong Company. Today, the reputation of Shinkong Group of enterprises has spread throughout the world, and this Shinkong Company is still its core member.

Mr. Wu's customary expression was the self-admonition, "Maintaining the statue quo means lagging behind." Therefore, people only saw him advancing, without ceasing. Mr. Wu's setting school aside to engage in commerce simply arose from his determination to make a living. Yet the deeper he went into business, the more ambitious his intentions became. From his childhood to his later years, he arose at dawn and returned to bed only after midnight. On the rare occasions when he had spare time, he read books and newspapers to acquire new knowledge. No one else could endure such hardship, and some people labeled him a workaholic or "business demon." Indeed, he, alone, never forsook his passion since he had already transformed his self-regarding bias into the public interest and because his discipline in artful living approximated the Confucian Way (Tao).

Mr. Wu's self-discipline in his life and work mirror Confucians' pursuit of learning: cultivating the essential virtues while remaining open and broad-minded. There is a breadth to the scope of enterprises that he ventured to establish throughout his life, from such businesses as tea, produce, deep-sea fishing fleets, to mining, cement, tires, glass, and even department stores. His successes and failures in these different enterprises varied according to the times; however, he was certain to give his all to each business he wanted to establish. Thus, his dedication to his profession also mirrors that of a Confucian.

Especially after reaching middle age, he became increasingly concerned with people's welfare and their lives; so he founded his life insurance company and natural gas company in 1963 and 1964. At that time, most people regarded these businesses as extremely precarious, but Mr. Wu

dared to undertake such risks. He advised people: “Diversified enterprises should be our nation’s top priority today.” This statement is representative of his independent insights and grand ideas.

While traveling throughout the world, Mr. Wu was certain to make detailed inquiries into foreign business conditions to use their experiences as a point of reference. Therefore, since he could apprehend and combine the strengths of both the East and the West, he was not constrained by their conventional rules and methods, but could determine what was appropriate to the time and situation. Mr. Wu placed utmost importance on keeping his commitments, so he enjoyed an international reputation for trustworthiness. Once, right after he had signed contracts for orders of Japanese cloth, the government in Taiwan issued new foreign exchange regulations that severely restricted imports. While other merchants cited the new regulations as an excuse for nullifying their contracts with Japan, Mr. Wu alone was unwilling to break his word. So he ended up attaining assistance from Japanese friends to assure his full faith and credit. These Japanese friends were his old colleagues from pre-war Taiwan. When they were being repatriated after the war, there were regulations against them taking their property and assets out of Taiwan; but Mr. Wu sought ways to return their assets to them later. Such thoughtfulness reflected his lifelong oath to himself to be honest, faithful, fair and ethical. During his travels as a private citizen to other countries, he was always received with courtesy and respect, so he certainly had the demeanor of Confucius’ disciple Tzu-kung in graciously conveying greetings and receiving generous hospitality.¹ During Mr. Wu’s later years, when the nation was undergoing much adversity, he was sometimes able to aid the country in areas its official diplomacy couldn’t reach and make accomplishments that were invisible to the public.

Mr. Wu was born on January 9, 1919, and died on October 18, 1986 at the age of 68. His wife, Ms. Liang Kuei-lan, continued her family’s tradition of studying *Poetry* and *Rites*; moreover, she possessed traditional virtues and managed the household so well that Mr. Wu had no worries about household matters. He had four sons, Eugene, Anthony, Thomas, and Eric, as well as two daughters, Linda and Jean. Each child has successfully pursued an education and is able to fulfill Mr. Wu’s ambitions. Mr. Wu’s family has lived in harmony, and his elder brother and younger brother actively participated in establishing his enterprises. This is an example of the adage: “If three people are in agreement, their edge is sharp enough to cut gold.”

Reviewing the past to form the present, Mr. Wu adopted the Confucian Way of cultivating harmonious relationships with his family and friends, and then enlarged and extended his warm feelings to all of society. Therefore, without passing over or excluding relatives and old friends from consideration, he only considered talent when hiring and promoting people. He has said that modern business management’s goal of maximizing efficiency and institutional rationality is inadequate to be relied on solely, for one’s pursuit of the goal must be supplemented with human feelings and moral principles before solidarity can be aroused from sharing both joys and sorrows. Therefore, he treated all of his 20,000 Shinkong employees like his own children and younger siblings; such was Mr. Wu’s humanness. In antiquity, Pai Kuei was famous for his business acumen; however, he remarked: “Therefore, if a man does not have wisdom enough to change with

the times, courage enough to make decisions, benevolence enough to know how to give and take, and strength enough to stand his ground, though he may wish to learn my methods, I will never teach them to him.”² Still, wisdom, humanness, courage, and strength are all concerns and ideas developed within Confucian philosophy; nonetheless, Mr. Wu was able to apply them in the business world. In the last 20 years, the Republic of China on Taiwan has become outstanding within East Asia because of its business enterprises. Some commentators say that all this success actually had its origins in Confucianism; moreover, when checked against Mr. Wu’s disciplined conduct, one could say that there is some reason behind such comments. Alas! Excellent! My inscription for the gravestone reads:

Being industrious and frugal,
You established enterprises and presided over your family.
Liberally giving charity and assisting society’s masses,
Your merits live on in our China.

Respectfully composed by Yu Ying-shih on 8 December 1986

Bibliography:

1. Tzu-kung (Tuan-mu Ssu) was the only one of Confucians’ disciples to be included by Ssu-ma Ch’ien in the “Biographies of the Money Makers,” and Professor Yu elsewhere provides a positive assessment of this aspect of Tzu-kung’s life. See Ying-shih Yu, “Business Culture and Chinese Traditions—Toward a Study of the Evolution of Merchant Culture in Chinese History,” Wang Gungwu and Wong Siu-lun, eds, *Dynamic Hong Kong: Business and Culture* (Hong Kong: Center of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1997), 14-15; and also Ssu-ma Ch’ien, *Shih-chi* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chu edition, 1959), 129:3258.
2. See Ssu-ma Ch’ien, *Shih-chi*, 129.3259; tr. Ying-shih Yu, “Business Culture,” 8.