

Dr William M W MONG

Citation

Anyone in Hong Kong who can spell Panasonic knows who Dr William Mong Man-wai is. Even among those who can't, chances are they still know who he is. He is a household name without seeking household status. He began by doing well in business and followed it by doing good in society. Today, his cross-over fame as an educational philanthropist threatens to overshadow his name as a mega-success in commerce.

If there was an aristocracy in merchandising, Dr Mong would surely be its first noble lord. The world has never seen a middleman like him: other agents merely market their merchandise, he helps redesign them. Dr Mong attributes his mechanical inventiveness to his training as an engineer at Tsinghua University, China's foremost institute of science and technology. He merges his role with that of a consumer advocate. By insisting on user-friendly design and superior quality, he develops a stranglehold on brand loyalty.

Not content with simply moving the merchandise, Dr Mong develops a unique vision of adding value to his customers. In the mid-1950's, in his early struggles, he could be seen lugging around a rice-cooker to barbershops for introductory demonstrations to captive patrons of what was then a new-fangled product. He knew that for converting his doubting customers, the nose was a more powerful organ than the eye. He cleverly added sausages to the steaming rice to bring out its mouth-watering aroma. He knew, too, that Chinese people had a habit of lifting the cooker's lid to check the progress of the cooking.

He badgered the Japanese production team until it added a glass-cover to the utensil. This was vintage William Mong, an innovative agent extraordinaire.

It was this family-like devotion to his customers, and fastidious attention to their needs that paved the path of popularity for the products he promoted. His active involvement in product improvement gave him a big say with the grateful Japanese manufacturer.

Thoughtful catering to customer needs is part of his ethical approach to the conduct of business. His agency agreement with the Japanese manufacturer is the stuff of legend. It was sealed with a mere handshake. Nothing was ever written down in black and white. To this day, more than fifty years after that celebrated handshake, that verbal agreement still stands. His spectacular sales success attracted the attention of a rival Japanese electrical appliance manufacturer. But he was unswayed by an agency offer from none other than Sony's august founder, becoming the only man in the world to spurn this much coveted agency overture. In over half a century of running his business, Dr Mong has never fired an employee, save for a lone worker who insisted on this unique honor as he desired a higher severance pay that came with being dismissed.

Dr Mong's success story is the Hong Kong miracle writ large. His arc of prosperity tracks this city's material progress. Local households have made the upward move with him from the

humble rice-cooker to the deluxe plasma TV. We grew up with his functional fridge and graduated to his myriad sophisticated gadgets. He is Hong Kong's archetypal "hero from zero".

Along the way, Dr Mong has turned his commercial success into our social largess, spreading his good fortune among educational causes and institutions. Today, numerous buildings in local, overseas and mainland universities named after him testify to his boundless goodness and generosity. He even has a star named in his honor.

His passionate interest in supporting educational causes stemmed from the sorry sight that greeted him when he traveled in war-torn China during the last world war. He saw multitudes of unattended street children missing out on a chance for a decent education. He fervently believes that China's future lies squarely in educating its young. For Hong Kong too, he knows that our prosperity lies in a hi-tech future. He was among the first to sponsor this university's cutting-edge nanotechnology research, long before its name was even known to the public. Timely educational philanthropy rides on his hard-won prosperity.

His own educational background speaks volumes of the person he is. In Hong Kong, he was educated at La Salle College where he learned the meaning of equality from the Irish Catholic brothers who treated every student alike, regardless of race, color or family background. That is why Dr Mong has never lost his common touch. Even today, he may sometimes be seen weaving in and out of street markets, sharing a joke with a fruit vendor here or chatting up a peddler there. An impish spirit of a child lurks in this big-hearted baron of business. Commerce has never cooled his warm heart nor has success robbed him of his playful sense of humor.

La Salle College, then as now, is a racial melting pot, with students of various racial origins: Portuguese, Indians and English, as well as Chinese. From this cosmopolitan environment he learned to live multiculturally, and even developed a taste for foreign languages. He may only boast a smattering of Portuguese and French, but he speaks English, Japanese and Putonghua near-natively. He is equally at home in a French bistro as he is in a Shanghai noodle shop. He is what the French would approvingly call a *bon vivant* — someone who knows the happy art of living.

This year in November, Dr Mong becomes officially an octogenarian. But how glorious are his 80 years! Today we celebrate an extraordinary life and honor a perfect gentleman who knows how to live and how to give.

Mr Chancellor, on behalf of the Council of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, I have the honor to present Dr William Mong Man-wai, chairman of the Shun Hing Group, for the award of Doctor of Business Administration *honoris causa*.