

Tao Zuen Chu – A Tribute

By Jane Cummings

EARLY BEGINNINGS

In 1948, the Chu family – Vico Chu, Tseneko Chu, Tao Zuen (affectionately called TZ) and his two sisters, Li-Chun and Li-Chiang Chu had to leave China on 24 hours notice on the last Air France flight out before the communist army entered Shanghai. Moving to India where they had business connections, the family enrolled the three children in Woodstock School in Northern India. It so happened that the day TZ first arrived in Mussoorie was “*holi*,” the day when Indians celebrate the arrival of spring by joyously throwing colored water and powder on friends and strangers alike. Although puzzled by this euphoric welcome, TZ greeted the Woodstock hostel house parents, Bob Alter and his gracious wife, Ellen, with the only words in English he knew – “Thank you, thank you very much.”

It was not long, however, before TZ became well known and respected around the Woodstock School campus. He was admired for his speed on the track and basketball court, his friendliness with staff and students alike and his academic interests and accomplishments. He was elected student body president and at graduation received the Best All-Around Student Award. He credits his chemistry teacher, Dr. Chacko, for developing in him a love of science, which for the rest of his life was the focus of his career and his philanthropic support of educational institutions.

The international character of Woodstock (in his grade were students of nine nationalities and six different faiths) was another transformative experience in his life. *“I was never conscious of being a minority member at the school or later in life,” he explains. I “always felt at home with people of all nationalities, faiths and cultural backgrounds.”*

THE BERKELEY CONNECTION

Following his graduation from Woodstock in 1952, TZ’s father insisted that TZ attend the University of California, Berkeley, where his older sister was enrolled and could look out for him. His arrival on the Berkeley campus was also rather dramatic: he was almost immediately diagnosed with a severe case of Hepatitis A that had accompanied him from India and spent the first several weeks in the college infirmary. Once on his feet, however, he began classes at the College of Chemistry to which he remained committed and supportive for the rest of his life.

During the school year, TZ worked in the math department correcting homework, grading tests, and tutoring graduate psychology students in statistics. He further saved on expenses by living and working in the Berkeley Students Co-operative. As he moved from kitchen pot washer to work shift manager to house manager he assumed more leadership responsibilities and was eventually elected president of the Berkeley Students Cooperative. TZ expresses great appreciation for his years in the Student’s Cooperative where mutual support was, and is, the modus operandi rather than the highly competitive academic environment of the University. *“In addition to around 40 of us who lived in the house,” he says, “we had twice as many, mostly graduate students, who ate their meals there. They were extremely helpful when we needed help*

academically. Indeed, I would say I learned more about chemistry and physics during dinners and lab sessions led by graduate teaching assistants than I did in the large classes taught by professors, especially for the lower division courses. I am forever grateful for the dedication of the graduate student teachers."

During the summers, TZ worked as a union-member laborer at a Del Monte fruit cannery in nearby San Leandro. *"Working as a laborer at the cannery was also a major contributing factor for my education," he says. "I was the only Asian worker at the cannery but I was given increasing responsibilities and eventually put in charge of quality control – a job never given to a union laborer before. I also learned to understand and appreciate the sentiments of the blue-collar workers (mostly Portuguese immigrants) which also subsequently served me well in my career."*

"Berkeley was a grind for me," he recalled. "Being a chemistry major in a highly competitive academic discipline, attending three-hour long laboratory classes most afternoons, and having to work most evenings and weekends. But, it probably was the best experience I could have in preparing for my career, mostly as CEO of instrument companies that served global markets."

ENTERING THE PROFESSIONAL WORLD

After graduation from Berkeley, TZ's first job was with a start-up company manufacturing gas chromatographs, then a significant new and powerful analytical instrument. Literally working in the founder's garage he was offered the job as the company's first applications chemist, which allowed him to communicate with existing and potential customers, demonstrating how to use a gas chromatograph to address their specific analytical needs. The company grew quickly and soon TZ was put in charge of marketing and sales and later assumed responsibilities over R&D and manufacturing as well. In 1962, the US Government lifted the restrictions that had previously prevented any Chinese who majored in sciences and engineering at US universities and colleges from leaving the US. This enabled TZ to visit his parents, who were living in France, for the first time in many years. He also visited a number of European chemical companies and government research laboratories. Finding much interest in Europe for gas chromatographs, he persuaded his boss to set up a European operation to market the instrument. His boss agreed -- on the condition that TZ would move to Europe to implement and manage it.

TZ arrived in Basel, Switzerland, the center of Swiss chemical and pharmaceutical industries, with two suitcases in the spring of 1963 and went to work hiring employees and setting up subsidiaries in several major European countries. It was in Basel that he met his wife, Irmgard Suetterlin. It was a romance that developed rapidly and they were married in Basel in 1963. TZ at the time was one of only two Asians living and working in Basel.

The rapid growth of the company soon attracted significant interest from large corporations. His company was acquired by Varian Associates, then a major technology company based in Palo Alto, CA. TZ was appointed general manager of the newly acquired division, becoming the youngest vice president of the company. A year later, Varian asked him to also assume responsibilities over another instrument company it had acquired based in Melbourne, Australia. TZ commuted every month between California and Australia for about two years, before he resigned to help rescue Finnigan Corporation, an analytical instrument company focused on mass spectrometry, from near bankruptcy. He took Finnigan public and Finnigan became the dominant mass spectrometer company. Strange as it may seem today, at the time

TZ was the first Asian CEO of a public technology company in America. After two decades, Thermo Electron, now ThermoFisher, acquired Finnigan and, according to the terms of the acquisition, TZ served as the subsidiary president for two years.

His retirement from Finnegan did not mean that TZ stopped working. He subsequently took a position at Hambrecht and Quest, a pioneer venture capital company investing in start up technology companies. TZ's reputation as an entrepreneur who could turn around struggling companies spread and it led to several positions as CEO or Board member of small companies. He finally retired in 2007 at the age of 78 to devote himself completely to his philanthropic and volunteer interests in supporting education.

In musing about his career, TZ says, *"Throughout my career, 12-hour days were the norm, since I lived and worked in California and had to be in touch with our European operations in early mornings and Asian operations in evenings. The working experience I gained and the broad responsibilities given to me while attending university and during the early stages of my career were incredible gifts. The lack of consciousness I gained during high school, university and in the industry to being "different" as a member of a minority race was also an incredible gift."*

TZ has definite views on leadership. Early in his career he had met David Packard of Hewlett Packard. TZ adopted Dave Packard's leadership style of being a CEO who "walked the walk" on the floor of factories and offices to talk with workers and employees at all levels of the company to get their input and hear their opinions. Reflecting on his successful career as a manager, CEO and president and board member of several public and private organizations, TZ offers this advice:

"Good leadership means treating everyone well and with respect. It is important to listen to people to find out what their solutions are to the issues they are dealing with. People won't follow those who just keep telling them what to do. A good leader has to have a vision, be a good listener and a good manager in the broadest sense if they are to get others to help implement the vision and goals. I am most proud of the fact that a number of individuals who worked for me became successful leaders themselves of companies and institutions. Identifying, encouraging and nourishing talents in others are the most satisfying rewards of any job."

Letters TZ has received from his colleagues supports this. One of them wrote, *"I most certainly want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to work for a wonderful company called Finnigan. Not only did I have a very good career with the company, I also met many genuine and honest colleagues. This is reflected in an annual reunion of Finnigan employees, which has been going on for 14 years. Many of my friends and my children find it hard to believe that so many of us keep in touch after all these years. But I think this reflects the culture and ethic of Finnigan. You should be very proud of it, as this is a reflection on you, and the culture you cultivated in the company."*

The Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History will be recognizing TZ as one of the twenty some immigrants who have made significant contributions to America in a new permanent exhibit "Many Voices, One Nation" to be opened in July 2017. The exhibit features contemporary Americans whose global origins and connections influence how they make their life, career, and community in the United States.

GIVING BACK

Following his retirement in 2007, TZ devoted his time and energy to his greatest interest: supporting educational institutions at all levels. While many different schools have benefitted from his financial generosity, his focus was mainly on the two schools he attended – Woodstock School in India and the University of California at Berkeley.

TZ believed success is measured by whether the contributions he made during his career had a lasting positive impact on the world. That led to him to endow a chair in the College of Chemistry at Berkeley, “The TZ and Irmgard Chu Distinguished Professorship.” He also served for several years as a trustee of the University of California Berkeley Foundation. He was an active volunteer, working with Jane Scheiber, Development Director in the College of Chemistry. Recently Jane wrote to TZ, *“Through your wonderfully generous philanthropy and hard work, you have helped to secure the future of several institutions. Who can foretell what wonderful things may come from the individuals who attend these schools or whose research you have supported?”*

Starting in the mid-90s and for the next 20 years, TZ visited Woodstock School on a regular basis. He served as a member of the Woodstock School Board of Directors. In 2007 he received the Woodstock Distinguished Alumni Award. He generously contributed to the rebuilding of the Midlands Residence during the school’s 150th Campaign and to the establishment of a Science Fund. Naturally he took an active interest in the science and math programs and frequently would personally buy and carry to the school science lab equipment not available in India. He was unequivocal in his belief that in order for students to have equal career opportunities, they had to have a base of scientific and quantitative skills imparted by excellent teachers conducting classes in physical sciences and mathematics.

In addition to serving on the Woodstock School Board in India, TZ was for many years on the Board of Directors of KWI International, a public US-based 501-c-3 organization that supported education especially at Woodstock and Kodaikanal International Schools in India. In the 1990s KWI underwent a major shift. The founding church missionary organizations which had established the schools in India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were decreasing their support as they faced declining budgets to focus on more urgent priorities. I was KWI executive director at the time and, looking for new KWI Board leadership, I turned to the alumni constituencies of Woodstock and Kodaikanal International schools to find individuals with proven track records in leadership, organizational management and fundraising. TZ joined the KWI Board in 1992 as chair of the development committee to raise funds for grants to the schools in India. After helping manage two capital campaigns he became president of the KWI Board of Directors at a time when KWI received grants from American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA) of USAID. Later when KWI spun off as Friends of Woodstock School (FWS), he served as president of the successor organization.

I attribute a great deal of the success that KWI enjoyed in the 1990’s and early part of the next decade to TZ. It was privilege to work with him and learn from him. He helped raise the standards of Board governance practices, and operational accountability and transparency that remain with the FWS Board today. His generosity, enthusiasm and kindness motivated his fellow Board members and all of us who worked with him. He brought out the best in each one of us, encouraging us to do more and accomplish higher goals than we ever thought we could.

In many ways, I like to think of TZ as the match that has lit many candles.

TZ always believed that transparent, accountable and accurate communication with all stakeholders was essential to the success of any organization. So for nearly 22 years, TZ personally took on the responsibility of communicating regularly with his classmates and many other Woodstock friends and colleagues through his legendary Class Letters. The letters in addition to information on classmates included current information on developments at Woodstock as well as articles of interest about India – from its political, economic and social developments to articles of human interest. *“Your Class letters have been something else,” writes Ashoke Chatterjee. “Each time, such a thoughtful and carefully worked out ‘passage to and from India.’ You have brought to my notice so much that I may have missed in the media.”*

Through these class letters, TZ became familiar to generations of Woodstock students. In thinking back on TZ's life and work, we can all share the sentiment of Suheil Tandon, a Woodstock student who graduated from Woodstock over 50 years after TZ did but who got to know TZ through his class letters. Suheil recently wrote TZ, *“I am honored to have known you through our connection to Woodstock, and it has been my privilege to have been in direct contact with you in the past couple of years. Thank you once again for all that you have done for Woodstock and the worldwide community in general. **You'll always be loved, and never be forgotten.**”*