

DATLINE EXTRA: The double life of Wing Woo

Whether he's advising Asian countries on economic reform or students on their future, this professor is making a long-term investment

By Julia Ann Easley

Professor [Wing Thye Woo](#) scratches a three-word invitation to visit him on a select few blue books from the piles he marks each examination period. He's repaying a debt to his own professors for the path he finally chose.

The economist was supposed to be an engineer.

Of Chinese descent, Woo was born and raised in Malaysia, a country that, by ninth grade, assigns students who score in the top third on a national examination to the fields of engineering or medicine--the social sciences were considered easier subjects.

As a young boy, Woo would bike through the streets of Georgetown, Malaysia, to the library run by the U.S. Information Service. He would pore over the newspapers and magazines. And even before he reached his teens, his young mind would ask questions like, "Why does one country get rich and another stay poor?"

Today, Woo not only poses sophisticated questions of international macroeconomics to his students at UC Davis, but he also helps to answer them for people in high places here in the United States and throughout Asia. A leading scholar of Asian economics, Woo advises countries making the transition from centrally planned to market economies, and, during the financial crisis that currently engulfs the region, his counsel is being sought by others--including the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

Drawn to Swarthmore

At that same U.S. library that fed his early interest in economics, Woo found college guidebooks with information about the engineering and economics programs at Swarthmore College--and about the college's needs-blind admissions policy.

Following admission to the elite Pennsylvania college, Woo embarked on studies that would earn him--tuition free--five degrees from three of the United States' pre-eminent institutions. "My family was exceedingly

surprised," says Woo, the son of a salesperson and one of five brothers. "It was something like a lottery--you participate without thinking anything will come of it."

Through accelerated studies at Swarthmore, Woo earned bachelor's degrees in both civil engineering and economics in 1976. He was unsure whether to pursue engineering or economics at graduate school. He knew only that he wanted to be "useful."

Then a Swarthmore professor intervened. He advised Woo to postpone his decision and recommended him for a job at the prestigious Brookings Institution, a policy-research organization in Washington, D.C. One year there made the decision for Woo, who went on to earn a master's degree in economics from Yale in 1978, and another master's degree and a Ph.D. in economics, both from Harvard in 1982.

Star student at Harvard

"He was my star student," says Woo's dissertation adviser, Jeffrey Sachs, now director of the [Harvard Institute for International Development](#). Woo returned to Brookings as a research associate for three years, and then in 1985 he came to UC Davis, drawn by California's interest in Asian Pacific studies and by fond memories of hitchhiking through the state 10 years earlier. "I was awed by the natural beauty and by the friendliness of the people."

Woo, who received tenure in 1991, says funding from the Institute of Governmental Affairs at UC Davis was instrumental in supporting his early scholarship. And he credits the international perspective of Robert Crummey, former dean of the College of Letters and Science, and Barbara Metcalf, dean of the Division of Social Sciences, for allowing him the flexibility to pursue research requiring travel.

Today, Woo is considered one of the world's leading economic experts on China and other Asian countries. He has advised several countries--including China, Indonesia, Mongolia and Ukraine--on macroeconomic and exchange-rate management, trade issues and financial-sector development.

Preferring those journals that will most quickly disseminate his findings and ideas to both academics and practitioners, Woo has published on economic development, reform and management, especially in Indonesia, China and Vietnam. His most recent scholarship includes *Economies in Transition: Comparing Asia and Europe*, a 1996 book he co-edited with Sachs and Stephen Parker, chief economist at the [Asia Foundation](#).

With the financial crisis now engulfing Asia, Woo is redirecting the focus of his research to how intergovernmental organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, can better respond to currency and banking crises.

Woo often jokes that, given his research and policy-advising activities, a

lot of what he does is "up in the air." Often apart from his wife, also an economist, and three daughters, he estimates that he logs more than 100,000 miles a year traveling.

"It's the nature of economics to develop quantitative procedures and formal models," Woo explains. "I have to go into countries and get the data. I have to persuade someone they would be better used in the public domain."

David Lipton, a Harvard classmate of Woo's who is now undersecretary for international affairs at the U.S. Treasury, says Woo does much of his research firsthand. "He gets out there into the ministries and institutes and meets the people. It's very impressive."

From March through October, Woo served an eight-month assignment as a special adviser to the treasury. During that time, he analyzed Vietnam-U.S. and China-U.S. economic relations, and he accompanied Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin to China to meet with the country's president and vice premier.

It was on that trip that Woo made the connections necessary to get hitherto secret Chinese customs records. He and other UC Davis researchers used the data to estimate more accurately the trade deficit between China and the United States, the political implications of which *The Wall Street Journal* called "far-reaching."

In fact, when he was introduced to Rubin, Woo made a characteristic quip about the two worlds he moves in. Playing off the phrase of "one country, two systems" used to describe China and Hong Kong, Woo depicted his dual roles as a professor and policy adviser as "one man, two systems."

Woo has also organized U.S. visits for two Chinese delegations and, in January, hosted China's vice minister of trade in a series of meetings across the country with business leaders, academics and members of Congress.

Sachs, considered by many to be the John Maynard Keynes of our day, says he has benefited enormously from collaborating with Woo to publish research and organize conferences. "He's helped me understand a large part of Asia."

Students are his first priority

Although Woo wins high praise from the well-placed and rubs shoulders with world leaders, he says his students are his first priority. What Woo still considers the greatest reward of his career came in his first year of teaching at UC Davis. He counseled a student from a small town in Northern California to pursue graduate studies at a school more challenging than the one she had initially chosen.

"I think I just considered myself to be a middle-of-the-road person," said

Elizabeth Collier, an international relations major who graduated in 1986. "Wing encouraged me to reach for the highest rung."

Now also a graduate of Hastings College of the Law, Collier practices out of the San Francisco office of Sedgwick, Detert, Moran & Arnold, one of the world's largest firms devoted exclusively to litigation.

"I'm able to do these things because people have helped me, because I received so much good guidance," Woo says. "It's not just classroom teaching. It's letting the students know they could be useful. It's shaping lives."

While his students were writing midterms last month, Woo delivered the keynote address to an international conference on state enterprise reform, held in Australia and then, in Beijing, chaired a forum for countries making the transition to market economies. When Woo returned, he had about 130 examinations to grade. Undoubtedly, he wrote on some the three-word invitation, "Come see me."

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