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Monday September 13, 2004

Taking on a giant

They say imitation is the best form of flattery. Renowned economist Wing-Thye Woo is where he is today because he imitated the world's best, LAM LI writes.

MOST experts would be offended if they were labelled “copy cats”, but not economist Wing-Thye Woo. In fact, the Penang-born economics professor attributes his success to having “imitated” renowned economists. In the last few decades, the 50-year-old Woo, who teaches at the University of California at Davis, United States, has made a name for himself as an expert on the Far East economy.

He was special adviser to US Treasury officials on trips to China and Hong Kong, and acted as adviser for the Asia Foundation project “Economies in Transition”. He was also a member of the consultant team for China’s Finance Ministry, and is currently special adviser for the East Asia Economies in the Millennium Development Goals project by United Nations.

However, the humble professor refuses to take all the credit for his work. Instead, he says his success is due to various people back home and abroad who “opened doors” for him.

Woo is the second child among five siblings. His mother is an

Fact File

Name: Wing-Thye Woo**Age:** 50**Hometown:** Penang

Education: Methodist Boys’ School, Penang; Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania – BA in economics, BSc in engineering (1976); Yale University, Connecticut – masters in economics (1978), Harvard University, Massachusetts – doctorate in economics (1982)

Occupation: Economist**Current base:** California, United States**Years abroad:** 31

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Wing-Thye Woo: 'Being exposed to information is not enough if there is nobody to teach you how to tap and digest that knowledge.'

illiterate housewife while his school dropout father sold liquor to put his children through school. Although both his parents do not speak English, all the children were sent to English-based missionary schools.

"Penang was rather 'international' in those days. English was widely used. There were many foreign resource centres providing free and up-to-date world news that became a source of information, knowledge and inspiration to me.

"But being exposed to information is not enough if there is nobody to teach you how to tap and digest that knowledge," said Woo, who was in Kuala Lumpur recently to give a talk entitled *Meeting the China Challenge: Malaysia's Economic and Business Response*.

He comes across as a person who tends to play down his own achievements. Despite having been away from Malaysia for more than 30 years, Woo could still easily recall the names of the people whom he says have helped him in the past.

"These are the people who have shaped my life. Without them, I wouldn't be who I am today. In fact, I am only a poor imitation of all these good, dedicated and talented people," he insisted.

First on his thank you list was his former primary school teacher Goh Peng Joo, whom Woo said was the person who first planted the hunger for knowledge in him.

"He encouraged his students to look beyond textbooks. He often loaned books to us from his own personal library. He was a very informed person and he would talk about world events during class. He opened our mental horizon and led us to believe that exploration of the world was very possible for us," he added.

Today, Woo is an academician, who apart from lecturing and researching, also jet sets across the continents to attend world affairs and economic conferences, seminars, and deliver talks.

Initially, he received a scholarship to study engineering in the United States at the age of 19. Then, he decided to take up a

double major: engineering and economics.

“I have always been more interested in learning the big picture of the world. To me, economics is more useful and presents the big picture.”

One of his mentors was renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs, who was recently recognised by *Time Magazine* as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2004. Woo first met Sachs when Woo was preparing for his doctorate thesis in 1979. At that time, he was working as a research assistant at the US National Bureau of Economic Research.

“I remembered I once asked him (Sachs): ‘Your work is very neat, can I imitate you?’” It opened the door for him to research contemporary economic issues, comparative studies and economies in transition under Sach’s wings.

The researches took him to various countries, especially eastern European nations, and he became a keen observer of history in the making. He saw how former communist states changed from central planning to market economy. Such experiences came in handy when Woo moved on to concentrate his work on China, which introduced economic reforms in the 1980s.

From 1948 till 1960, Malaya underwent the Emergency when the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), which tried to mirror the model practised in China, wanted to take over the government.

“I have always wondered about the alternative offered by Communism. This drove me to pay attention to things happening in China and I finally set foot there in September 1989. I spent four months researching the economic reforms at a local university,” he explained.

As a product of that visit, he published his first paper on China in which he made comparisons between the economies in transition in Eastern Europe and China. Since then, he has published other writings on China and is now deemed an authoritative voice on the study of the emergence of China as an economic giant.

At present, he is on a panel that specialises in researches on Asian economies. He is also working actively towards the reduction of poverty, specifically in Africa, through his role in the Millennium project by the United Nations, and he hopes to contribute to Malaysia’s fight against urban poverty.

“I can relate to urban poverty. It was all around me during my

growing up years,” said Woo, who has excelled through what he calls imitating “selectively, intelligently and creatively”.

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