Interview with Prof. William W-G Yeh, a Recipient of 2008 NCKU Outstanding Alumni Award

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Preamble

In the beginning of a new year, Prof William Yeh, graduated from the Department of Civil Engineering (CE Dept.) in 1961, conferred the 2008 NCKU Outstanding Alumni Award, returned to the Department and was honored in the Alumni Lecture Room. He gave a lecture to share his abundant academic and life experiences. After lunch, invited by Prof. Tungyang Chen, Chairperson of CE Dept., Prof. Yeh accepted an interview from members of CE Dept. Student Union. Prof. Yeh, being supportive and kind, answered all questions and made sincere suggestions. I write down this elevating experience to share the joy of broadening horizon with you.

Education

Speaking of his education, Prof. Yeh said that after leaving NCKU for many years, once thinking of her he missed her more with gratitude. He wanted to thank NCKU for having laid a solid academic foundation for him. In the beginning, he studied in the field of engineering management. Then he transferred to study in the field of civil engineering. At that time, in the fourth year, students were grouped roughly by academic specialty: hydrology, geotechnical engineering, structure engineering, transportation engineering, and environmental engineering, etc. Before graduation, students were clear of what they wanted to pursue. Prof. Yeh said that he had never thought of a "plan B". He simply embarked on the academic career which he firmly believes in.
At that time, to study abroad for advanced degrees was not easy. Challenged by language and culture, he worked harder to make continuous breakthroughs to make his dream come true. To strengthen one’s communication proficiency in a foreign language, Prof. Yeh recommended us to excel in writing and speaking. Through real life encounters, one would become aware of the trivia and differences between cultures. One should also learn to adapt to and fit in another culture.

Prof. Yeh smiled during the whole interview, which was warm and impressive. We believe the humble attitude is a key factor which summons good and smooth interpersonal relations for him.

Academic Career

In the US, academic evaluation includes three aspects: teaching, research and service. After the PhD degree, Prof. Yeh continued his academic journey. Universities, he reckoned, have clearly defined goals and are more straightforward, so he stayed here to hold on to his passion for research.

With this passion, he experienced the tough and crooked on-the-spot investigation, strode across
culture and language gaps. He has evolved from a newly arrived student strengthening foreign language skills in speaking and writing to an educator having supervised nearly 50 PhDs among his numerous students. Prof. Yeh’s pragmatic attitude is validated by his 40-year devotion to the teaching, research and application of water resources planning and management and groundwater model, as well as collaborations with the US federal government and other countries. Prof. Yeh is altruistic and has helped many friends and colleagues. People feel grateful for him, but he is rewarded with enjoying the blessing of giving and sharing.

Prof. Yeh served twice the chairperson of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering in UCLA. He illustrated his philosophy of education with the coordinate axes: the vertical axis was independent thinking and judgment, and the horizontal axis was the discussion among peers or colleagues. He organized a meeting for his research team on each Friday morning. In the brainstorming time, he would lead the team members to think critically. Sometimes he invited experts from industries, related departments in the federal, state or local government to exchange ideas with the students. In this relaxed atmosphere, the academia and the industry were connected and the students formed a clearer picture of what they were learning and knew their place in the real world, which Prof. Yeh valued the most.

Prof. Yeh knows what he wants and is highly selective: he would not take projects which are too complicated or ordinary; rather, he would devote his time and energy to make breakthroughs and handle challenging subjects requiring extra commitment. In recent years he took less engineering projects and dealt with details in highly challenging or uncertain projects. He evaluated the pros and cons of all alternatives and made sound recommendations for the authorities. His relentless commitment leads him to dive into the deepest level regardless of hardships. He joined many rescue and reconstruction relief teams, and was on ground zero of southeast Asia tsunami. Prof. Yeh is a gentleman with exceptional willpower and daring spirit. He faces uncertain circumstances with superior calculation and contributes his capabilities to places struck by difficulties. With actions, Prof. Yeh showed his passion for life behind the logic training.

Prof. Yeh is open-minded so he does not impose too many restraints on his students. Of course his two sons made their own career choices and they both study medicine. Prof. Yeh respects their decisions. For us students in the Department of Civil Engineering, while evaluating the three possible career types, he was objective. The only criterion is one’s own preference. Concerning academia, government and consulting firms, respectively, academia is concerned with research and poses more challenges and uncertainty. In the government there would be holidays and more free time. In consulting firms the preoccupation is construction projects requiring methods in implementations. Each of them is good for something, and no one is better than another. One should evaluate the alternatives according to one’s own needs. What you want is the right choice.
Family and leisure life

As the popular commercial sound bite a few years ago in Taiwan goes, “I’d have a cup of coffee with you no matter how busy I am”, Prof. Yeh has dinner with his family no matter how busy he is. He spends time with his wife and children on weekends. This also allows him to acquire the essential relaxation and distraction from a busy schedule. He insists on family times. For the permeating Internet nowadays, he chuckled and said that this modern technology sometimes made him do business even at home. Somehow he favors the days when books and documents could be left in the office. From his words, we can tell he has a happy and harmonious family life. He is not only successful in his career, but also understands life. He is indeed a good husband and a good father.
Prof. William Yeh was one of the best players on the NCKU Table Tennis Team during university days. After marriage, he took his children to ski. Nowadays tennis is his new passion. Prof. Yeh is healthy, broad-minded, and always willing to offer help. With a lifetime in teaching, he said he also grew from working with the students.

**Encouragement and expectations**

Prof. Yeh’s encouragement for the students, fundamentally, is to “work hard”. He believes that NCKU students are endowed with similar potential, the thing that will make a difference is how much effort one is willing to make. He encourages the students to have self-confidence. Be enthusiastic and single-minded and one will reach one’s goal.

After reading the education, academic and life story of Prof. William Yeh, the next time when you walk along the University Road, “Knowledge and Truth” (窮理致知) will come to life because you know there is a true story illustrating its essence. The belief still ignites this intellectual keen on doing researches everyday. Prof. William Yeh is a shining example for all of us.
A Brief Introduction of Prof. William W-G Yeh

Education and experience:

BS, Civil Engineering 1961-National Cheng Kung University

MS, Civil Engineering 1964-New Mexico State University

PhD, Civil Engineering 1967-Stanford University

Professor and Chair - Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, University of Cal

Professor and Chair, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, UCLA, 2002-2007

Professor and Chair, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, UCLA, 1985-1988

Professor and Vice Chair, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, UCLA, 1979-1982

Professor, UCLA, 1977-Present

Associate Professor and Vice Chair, UCLA, 1975-1976

Associate Professor, UCLA, 1973-1977

Awards and Honors:

1975 UCLA Eng. Alumni Assoc. Distinguished Faculty Award for excellence in teaching

1981 Engineering Foundation Fellowship Award on behalf of ASCE

1989 American Geophysical Union's Robert E. Horton Award

1993 Elected Fellow, American Geophysical Union

1994 American Society of Civil Engineers' Julian Hinds Award

1994 ASCE Water Resources Planning & Manag. Division's Outstanding Journal Paper Award

1994 Elected Fellow, American Society of Civil Engineers

1996 Elected Honorary Member, American Society of Civil Engineers

1996 Centennial Distinguished Alum, New Mexico State University


2003 Outstanding Alumni Award, NCKU North American Alumni Foundation

2008 Elected Member, National Academy of Engineering, USA
2008 Distinguished Alumnus Award, National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan

2008 Elected Honorary Diplomat, American Academy of Water Resources Engineers

Career

After graduation from the Department of Civil Engineering, NCKU, Prof. William Yeh went to the US for advanced degrees. After obtaining a PhD degree from the Stanford University, he joined UCLA. After decades of hard work, he advanced from associate research engineer to distinguished professor. He never stops his efforts and has dedicated himself to teaching, research, academic service and field application. In the early days he was awarded Distinguished Faculty Award for excellence in teaching. Afterwards he devoted himself to nourish advanced researchers. To date, he has graduated 48 PhD students. Many of his former PhD students are now successful teachers, researchers, and practicing engineers at various distinguished institutions and industries in the United States and abroad. Prof. Yeh has made major contributions in large-scale water resources systems planning, management and R & D for methods for optimizing real-time operation. The other field of his major accomplishment is the groundwater parameter structure identification. The fruits of his research are continuously applied to water resources projects in many countries around the world. In addition to teaching and research, Prof. Yeh also actively involves in academic service positions. He has served many important posts in various councils in AGU and ASCE. He has directed or assisted on editorial boards of two internationally prestigious academic journals in water resources studies. He is now an elected member of the National Academy of Engineering.

Prof. William Yeh’s webpage: http://cee.ucla.edu/cgi-bin/news.php?nid=35

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