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Kingston Technology President John Tu How the “Good Boss” Changed 150 Children's Lives

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John Tu and his company, Kingston Technology, have long been the stuff of legends. Now, having drawn the attention of Hollywood, another of Tu's legends is showing in theaters all over the world.



photo: Kuo-Tai Liu

In the past, the name of John Tu, president of Kingston Technology, listed by *Fortune* magazine as one of the 100 best companies to work for in the United States for five consecutive years, quickly brought to mind a good boss who treated his employees extremely well.

Nowadays, this "good boss" who immigrated from Taiwan to the United States is providing even greater cause for shame, and respect, among people in the United States.

In mid-January, when Tu received notification that the University of New Haven in the state of Connecticut wished to confer upon him an Honorary Doctorate of Engineering, his first reaction was to politely decline the gracious offer. In explaining why, the 66-year-old Tu chuckles as he says, "It takes ten years of hard study before you qualify for a doctorate degree, but I never liked to study."

However, due to heavy persuasion applied by New Haven's professor emeritus Henry C. Lee, the international criminal investigation expert who has taught at the university for thirty years, Tu was convinced to accept the honor, previously bestowed upon former President of the United States George H.W. Bush. The reason Lee used to persuade Tu was a simple one. He told Tu that as a person from Asia, to publicly accept such an honor in mainstream society in the United States would help enhance the image of Asian people living there.

The fact is that John Tu, a man who immigrated to the United States and together with partner David Sun started Kingston Technology out of their own garage, building it into the world's largest dynamic random access memory (DRAM) maker, has long been the pride of Taiwanese expatriates in the U.S.

Indeed, whether it is the small details of his life or the great compassion he has demonstrated in the public sphere over the years, Tu seems to have set a worthy example for all Americans.

In February, Tu, who returns to Taiwan less frequently than Sun, came back to preside over the year-end banquet of Kingston's Taiwanese subsidiary. Sporting a fitted leather suit coat and dark blue jeans, Tu, who studied as a youth in Europe, is the spitting image of a European gentleman. His partner, by comparison, comes off a little rougher around the edges.

Chatting with the Homeless

While his style and clothing radiate a refined air of nobility, one of the things John Tu does most often is in fact quite plebeian: that is, chatting with people who have fallen into destitution on the streets of the United States.

It is difficult to imagine that this billionaire, with his stylish appearance and brand-name fashion, often stops his Ferrari at the side of the road and walks right up to homeless people to make friends. He says, "What's up!" as he greets and shakes hands with the homeless. It is in this casual and friendly manner that Tu strikes up conversations as he sits with people living on the streets.

"What happened to you?" says Tu. He always likes to ask homeless people the reasons they ended up on the streets. On the bustling city streets of California, countless homeless live as invisible people, with others turning a blind eye to their existence or even avoiding them altogether. Nonetheless, John Tu says that many have fallen into homelessness due to a spell of bad luck from which

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they were never able to recover. "David and I, we once incurred a debt of US\$1 million in the early days. So, we might well have become people sitting on the streets too," he says with a laugh.

Tu is often laughed at by his friends for his habit of approaching homeless people to inquire as to their well-being and then generously handing them US\$20 at the end of the conversation. Though they call him stupid, he says, "Even if he continues to live this way afterwards, at least today is different, because someone cares." Tu says in all earnestness, "I of course don't possess the ability to solve all of society's problems, but I can at least take care of one person's happiness for one hour."

"John is a person who is good at communicating, enjoys communicating, and places a lot of importance on communicating," notes the more carefree David Sun, ten years his junior. When mentioning his business partner, who is like a brother and friend to him, Sun points out that while such famous institutions as Harvard and Stanford present Kingston's success story as a case study in corporate management, they have ultimately failed to formulate a theory of success behind the "Kingston Way." "Actually, the 'Kingston Secret' is the sharing and communicating John engages in," says Sun.

New Version of "Dead Poets Society"

Tu, who once placed the keys to one of the Ferrari sports cars he collects on a counter near his company's main entrance, has clearly demonstrated his spirit of sharing within the halls of Kingston. But he has also begun to earn a reputation in the United States, and even around the world, for the way he has shared with American society.

This story can be told starting with "Freedom Writers," a movie starring two-time Oscar-winner Hilary Swank that is currently showing in the United States. (The film is scheduled for release in Taiwan in mid-April.)

"Freedom Writers" is the story of a young female teacher who finds success in bringing inspiration to a group of problem students. In this real-life version of the 1989 movie "Dead Poets Society" that occurred in California, it is John Tu who is the pivotal behind-the-scenes hero.

The movie opens on Wilson High School, a public school located in a poor neighborhood in Long Beach, California, where different ethnic groups from South America, Africa and Asia are pitted against each other. It is a place where, when things go wrong, it is not unusual to see students in the classroom face off with guns drawn.

Eight years ago, Erin Gruwell, a young female teacher who grew up in a white, middle-class household, had arrived at this school to accept a teaching position. Following the initial shock of confronting this group of students who come mostly from single-parent and violent homes, she resolves to reconcile the ethnic biases of these students and help them escape from the margins of society.

Ms. Gruwell's method is to purchase each student a copy of "Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl," the famous story of the massacre of Jews by the German Nazis during World War Two, and require that the students record their feelings after reading the book each day and keep daily journals. Those students that follow instructions will be presented with a computer as a reward.

Money, of course, is Ms. Gruwell's biggest problem. However, at this time, she realizes that her husband's boss would certainly be willing to help her. This person that has come to her mind that would generously open his heart and wallet is none other than John Tu. Just as expected, once Tu hears the teacher's idea, he vows to provide all expenses for the project without giving it a second thought.

Respected Like a Father

With Tu donating a total of around US\$300,000, not only did every one of the 150 students in Ms. Gruwell's two grade levels graduate without a hitch, but over half went on to university. These students managed to escape from the darker side of life and are now gainfully employed members of society. Some even hold positions as lawyers and teachers. All 150 of these students respect Tu like a father.

The journals and stories of these 150 lower-class students from the United States were published as the book *Freedom Writers Diary*. It remains one of the best-selling books in the United States at the moment.

In the book, one young girl relates her experience when John Tu treated the students to dinner: He sat by her side and talked to her for twenty minutes, and she felt amazed, because nobody had paid such attention to her before. She wondered why someone so smart as John, who could have many people listening to him, was instead willing to listen to her. Revealing that her own father had not even spoken with her for more than twenty minutes since she turned sixteen, the girl wrote that this single conversation had had a truly big impact on her.

More Giving Than Taking

This son of Taiwan found himself expelled from three schools during high school because of his lack of interest in studying. His father felt he had no choice but send Tu to study in Germany. Though he spoke not a word of German, Tu opened up to his new home and began to take in the coldness and warmth of living in another country.

Tu immigrated to the United States in 1971. After getting to know David Sun, the two succeeded in establishing a business on their first attempt. Unfortunately, in the wake of the infamous "Black Monday" stock market crash of 1987, the US\$5 million they had toiled to save up was suddenly lost, and they ended up burdened with a debt of US\$1 million.

Now, after having worn their hands and feet to the bone as they rebuilt their business, Kingston is forecast to achieve revenues of US\$4 billion this year. Nonetheless, Tu and Sun remain insistent on keeping their company off the stock market. As if with one voice, the partners say that it is this reason alone that has allowed them to reserve the right to run the company just as they wish to.

In contrast to many companies that raise funds publicly through stock markets, Kingston has taken relatively few societal resources, and given more to society instead.

With so many scholars of business management and competitors in the market place all studying the so-called "Kingston Way" these days, perhaps it is just

this sharing and giving demonstrated by John Tu that will be revealed as one of the golden rules of business.