

Remembering Laobo

In Memory of Distinguished
Professor Max Boisot



■ By Lv Yuan (CEMP 1984)

It was at noon on September 8, 2011 that I received the news that Laobo had passed away from cancer. Only two weeks earlier had I learned that he was ill, and given that he was strong and not yet 70 years old, I had assumed it was a minor ailment. Things happened so fast, before I could send my greetings he had become smoke and ashes.

Laobo is the nickname that we gave to Max Boisot, whose Chinese name is Bosimai (博思迈). He was very proud of his Chinese name, which reflects his wisdom and extensive studies. Laobo arrived in Beijing in 1983 to represent the European Union (EU) in negotiations with the State Economic Commission of China for a jointly-hosted MBA programme. Once an agreement was reached, Laobo was appointed Director of the China-EEC Management Programme. In 1988, the programme was renamed China Europe Management Institute (CEMI) and in 1993, CEMI was moved south to Shanghai, where Shanghai Jiaotong University became its Chinese partner and the name was changed to what we know today as China Europe International Business School (CEIBS). I was among the first batch of students in the MBA programme, and then later I went on to the UK to study for my PhD. Laobo was a research partner of my PhD supervisor John Child, who was a great mentor of mine.

When China and the EU began to cooperate in running a business school together in 1984, both parties were very prudent. They relied only on placing a small ad in newspapers like *Beijing Daily News* to attract potential MBA students. A colleague of mine saw the ad and suggested that I take the admissions exam as soon as possible. "If you succeed, you could get a job in the State Economic Commission, and even work abroad," he said. I was working at the Beijing Association of Science and Technology at that time, where I was responsible for training adults. I was bored with the job, and was distressed when my supervisor rejected my application for a transfer. When I told the supervisor that I wanted to take the MBA admissions examination, he grudgingly consented, warning me that I would only get one chance. If I failed, I should never mention it again.

I was allowed two weeks of leave in order to prepare for the exam. I remember in those days it was difficult to find any reference material on business administration, but I managed to find three books. Luckily I passed the examination and later I found out that I had the seventh highest score among our class.

I remember going for my admissions interview, and when I entered the room, Laobo was one of the interviewers, seated



in the centre. I was deeply impressed by his large physique and his magnetic British accent. Later, someone told me that he had studied at Eton College, one of the top schools in Britain.

I performed well during the interview and was admitted to CEIBS, which began a new chapter in my life. CEIBS used the trimester system, and each semester three professors recruited from the most celebrated business schools in Europe came to Beijing to teach us. While most of the professors would return to Europe at the end of a semester, Laobo remained in Beijing, living in a hotel.

At first, many of the students in our class were not that warm towards him. This was in part because of his aristocratic British accent, and his manner, which came across to us as arrogant, though

once we got to know him we realised Laobo could be very humorous. Our classes were all conducted in English and even our textbooks were in English, and contained many concepts we had never yet heard of in China. Many students wanted the courses to focus on the conditions in China. However Laobo firmly refused to change the curriculum. He said that what we viewed as useless was the theoretical basis of economic development and business administration that had been repeatedly proven in practice.

Laobo also assigned us a great deal of work. Each section of our programme required that we do in-depth case studies and research reports on various enterprises. Our examinations and reports were all done in English, which added to the workload. We complained

to the Chinese leaders at the school that we felt overburdened with work. Finally, Laobo came to our class, and listened as the 30 or so of us laid out our complaints. In the end, Laobo replied, "I totally understand what you've said, but I'd like ask you, what is an MBA?"

We were all dumbfounded. "You must survive in any environment; that is what an MBA means," he said. Even to this day, I remember Laobo's definition of an MBA, and convey it to my students. Looking back now, we are deeply proud of being the first group of China's MBA students to have studied modern management.

Just before we were to graduate in 1986, we had to submit a general group report on our enterprise research. I was chief editor for our group's report; it was over

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100 pages. I later learned that Laobo had spent nine hours editing our report before he gave it to others to use as reference. I was both deeply touched and I also felt very guilty when I heard this.

CEIBS changed my life, and Laobo changed my way of thinking. Before I went abroad for my PhD studies at Aston University in the UK, Laobo managed to find time to talk with me. I felt badly because I used to misunderstand him, and sometimes I had fought against his suggestions. But, he did not mind at all. Instead, he patiently told me how to handle the formalities and differences between a PhD and an MBA degree. He believed that I could finish my PhD study with guidance from Professor Child.

During my time in Aston University, I

saw Laobo several times when he came to work with my supervisor Professor Child. In 1988, they co-authored an article that appeared in one of the world's top journals, *Administrative Science Quarterly*. The article has since become a classic research study of China's economic system. They collaborated on many other research studies, and Laobo gradually established his reputation in academic circles. His many published studies have had a profound influence.

After I graduated from Aston, I went to Cambridge University with my supervisor, and saw Laobo several times. Every time I saw him he was always writing while he talked with me. When I began working at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1996 we kept in touch and whenever he was in Hong Kong he

would find time to see me. Once, he was transiting through Hong Kong and had no time to leave the airport, so I met him there for an hour-long discussion over a meal.

When I was visiting Wharton in August 2000 a professor invited me to dinner at his home. Coincidentally I found that Laobo was there too. We were all very surprised. Everyone was always happy to see Laobo. Wherever he went, he was in the spotlight. People enjoyed listening to him, because when he spoke he was very inspiring and enlightening. He was full of endless ideas and energy. No one could imagine that such an energetic, creative and wise man would pass away so fast.

His life was short, but brilliant and impressive. I miss you, Laobo, you are forever my teacher.



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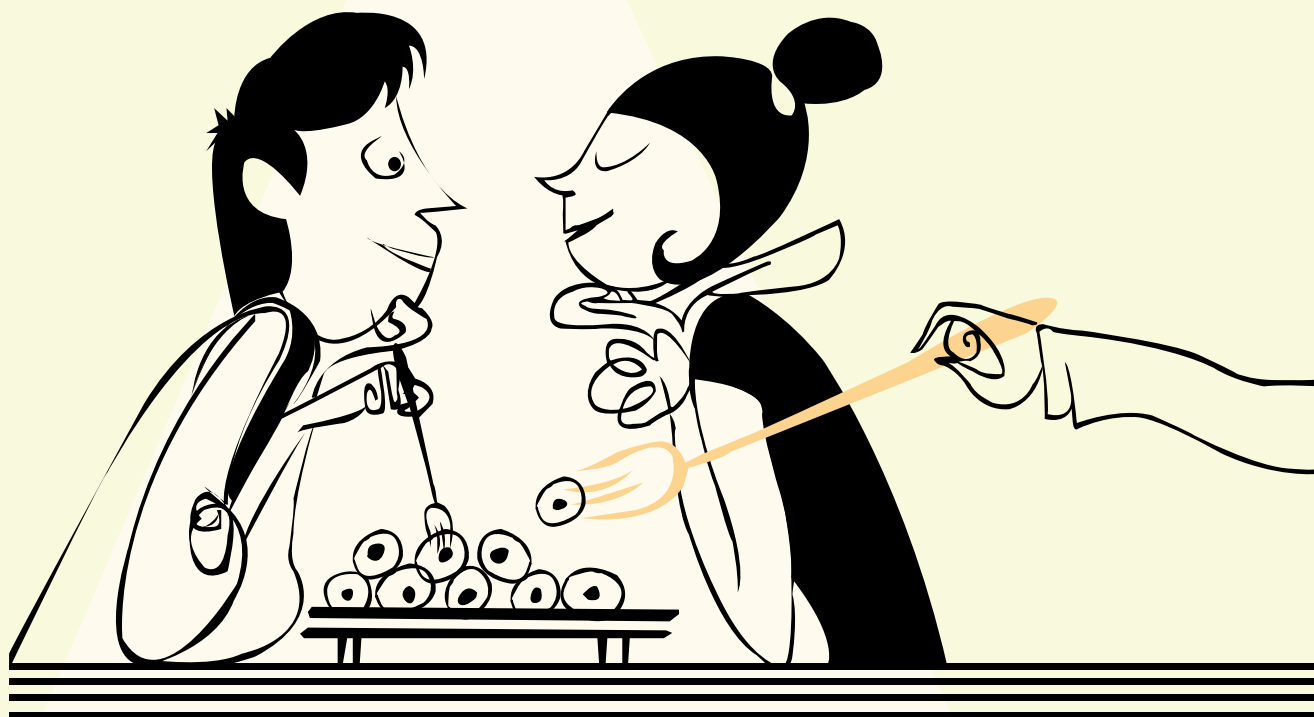
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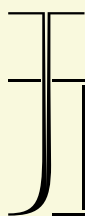
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