

VINCENT CHANG: Riches, or Royalty?



■ By Lei Na & Li Runnan

Many top engineers in China's mainland and Taiwan learned the 'ABCs' of the semiconductor industry in textbooks written by Vincent Chang. That's because more than two decades ago, when Taiwan's semiconductor industry was budding, Chang, then Doctor of Electric Engineering at National Taiwan University, wrote 14 textbooks on microelectronics.

These books are now lying quietly on a shelf in his office. Next to them are others on business administration, a hint about the two stages of his career.

Chang is now Director of CEIBS eLab (which fosters entrepreneurship) and Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurship. One brisk winter morning, he sat down with *TheLINK* to talk about his move from Taipei to California and then to Shanghai, and the twists and turns in his life as he transformed himself from a scholar to an entrepreneur, and then a coach of entrepreneurs.

Born in Pingtung, Taiwan, Chang left his hometown to study at Taipei

Municipal Chien-Kuo Senior High School. After that he did his doctoral degree in Electrical Engineering at National Taiwan University, then became Associate Professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering at Tamkang University. Doctoral candidates typically focus on research but Chang took the unusual step of teaching while he studied. The popularity of his microelectronics textbooks ensured he had a steady stream of part-time teaching jobs. "I had to work shifts, and sometimes I had to teach in three cities in a day," he said. His hectic schedule had to be balanced with taking care of his ill father and finding time for a personal life. "My father had a stroke and had to be cared for. My income from teaching and textbook-authoring could not only cover his medical expenses but also support my girlfriend (now my wife) who was doing an MBA in the USA. It seems that I've been an entrepreneur since then."

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in some cities all the spots were filled even a year ahead of time. His rigour in teaching and learning became well-known through word of mouth and he was rewarded with the informal title of Star Teacher of Taiwan's Microelectronics. "The best marketing strategy is to exceed customers' expectations, and this has greatly influenced my approach to teaching," he explained. "Since 1995, I have made a point of not using textbooks, notes, or slides when giving lessons. I have all the classes for the four hours in my mind, including circuit diagrams, equation derivations and data. All these are precise, even to the point of

knowing on which line and which page of the textbook they appear."

Associate Professor at Tamkang University, author of popular textbooks with lucrative copyright royalties, star teacher of microelectronics, these are the professional roles that filled Chang's life before he was 39. He balanced it all with a happy home with his wife who became the Taiwan General Manager for LV brands Dior, Guerlain, and Givenchy after her MBA. They had an idyllic life, with their two lovely children, in a grand apartment bought near the Taiwan 101 tower. Then a trip to Hawaii in 1995 became the catalyst for a major change in Chang's life.

"This trip abroad had a great impact on me. Besides lack of knowledge about culture, my inability to engage in in-depth communication in English was also a problem for me. My wife had studied abroad and was fluent in English, so she was often responsible for communication while I was busy taking notes," he recalled. "The result was that others were enjoying the trip, while I was taking a heap of notes and taking them back home." In the next eight years, he worked hard to improve his English. By 2003, he felt everything was ready; he decided to do an MBA at the University of Southern California (USC). He was giving up a

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good life and stable career in Taipei to become a student. It was also a time for him to reflect on what he really wanted to do, a time to follow his dreams. “Early on I excelled in the sciences, and chose one of the most popular disciplines – electrical engineering – as my major. But it was not my dream. Maybe I had a knack for law and business, but I did not have the opportunity to try them out. At the mid-point in life, I wanted to have a try, out of curiosity and instinct,” he said.

He is extremely grateful to his wife for the support she provided during his period of self-exploration. At the time she was a rising star in the fashion industry with her management skills featured on the pages of *Vogue*. She gave up all the glamour of the industry, and became an ordinary housewife in the USA so that her

husband could pursue his dream. “She’s my best friend,” says Chang. It’s an ordinary phrase, but one that crystallises the depth of emotion and love that has sustained them through 30 years together. “The mutual trust, support and understanding between us have been the best way we could nurture each other in life.”

CALIFORNIA: SELF-AWARENESS IN FAILURE

When he arrived in California for his MBA, Chang took a photo of himself beside the time machine from the Hollywood movie “Back to the Future” – the DeLorean. He taught modern physics at university and this film, with its references to Einstein’s theory of relativity, was particularly to his liking. At the same time he was well

aware that, in real life, the bravest thing is not about going back to the past or the future, but to be brave enough to start anew no matter your age.

“In maths there’s a concept called the Sigmoid Curve,” Chang said as he drew two intersecting curves. Effortlessly slipping into teacher mode, he explained that this curve has been widely used to explain the life cycles of individuals and organisations. The typical career path involves a lengthy period of learning followed by quick growth, and will inevitably enter a downward slide after reaching the pinnacle. Successful people and organisations will look back at themselves from time to time, get a clear picture of their place on the Sigmoid Curve, and begin from the bottom of a new curve after reaching the pinnacle of the old. “This may be painful, but it’s a process during which one learns to be



humble,” said Chang. He should know; after all he reinvented himself when he made the decision to go back to school.

After his graduation from the USC’s MBA programme in 2004, Chang launched a California-based online education company called Knowledge Master Inc (KMI). It was inspired by one of his MBA classmates who once asked him, “Why not teach more students microelectronics now that you’ve taught over 30,000 in real classes?” So Chang decided to put his microelectronics courses on the Internet. At the time, there was no YouTube; KMI was one of the pioneers in the use of video streaming technology. When the courses were first released, the reception was lukewarm in Asia and not much better in the USA. He was basically starting over from scratch, and it was tough. “The first three years were bleak, I suffered a lot of setbacks,” said Chang of those days. But in the depth of despair he came up with the idea to save his start-up by working with existing brand names. So he began to seek collaborations with renowned

universities. In the beginning he was only brave enough to contact the lower ranked universities in the US, but was rejected nonetheless. “In the US I tasted failure to the fullest at the beginning of the second half of my professional life. But this forced me to take off my “crown” of “star teacher”, and taught me humbleness as an entrepreneur,” he said.

Then in 2007, he had a breakthrough. KMI signed a seven-year contract with the Regents of University of California, and collaborated with University of California at Berkeley to release their “Semiconductor Leadership” courses. Chang’s career had entered a new phase.

ELAB: THIRD-TIME ENTREPRENEUR

By 2010, Chang’s company was relatively stable. His wife noticed that there was great potential in China’s luxury market, and wanted to return to the country for the second half of her career. It was time for her to follow her

dream and Chang was there to support her. He followed her to Shanghai. She returned to the LV group, and he became Teaching Professor and Faculty Director of Corporate Relations at University of Michigan-Shanghai Jiao Tong University Joint Institute. At work he met VP of Covidien Kurt Smith, who told him that “entrepreneurial innovation” would be very significant for China. This gave Chang new inspiration. He designed new training projects, opened three new entrepreneurship courses, and created 122 technological innovation capstone design projects sponsored by multinational corporations.

In 2014, Chang met CEIBS Professor of Entrepreneurship Ramakrishna Velamuri and CEIBS MBA Programme Director Shimin Chen. The introduction came through his wife during the CEIBS-Jing’an Prestige Brand Forum which was moderated by CEIBS Professor of Marketing Chiang Jeongwen. The chance meeting paid off. Chang later joined the school as Director of CEIBS eLab and Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurship, the third phase of his professional career.

The eLab is an incubator that pulls together and leverages the resources of CEIBS entrepreneurs, students and alumni to develop entrepreneurial ventures. It is now providing guidance and support to 14 teams. Chang categorises projects into the four phases of Idea, Design, Evaluation and Acceleration (IDEA) according to their maturity, feasibility, investment potential and possibility of success. Thanks to an RMB30 million investment from alumni company ChairMan Capital, the eLab

launched the IDEA programme and inaugural Entrepreneurship Bootcamp in November 2015.

As Chang sees it, the eLab itself is an entrepreneurial venture. He is pushing it forward with a combination of entrepreneurial thinking – including a healthy dose of risk-taking – innovation, good use of resources and the ability to quickly make changes as needed. He advocates bootstrapping, and does not encourage eLab members dreaming too much of the wealth effect and financing. He believes it is important for entrepreneurs to understand that financing before IPO is actually debt. His advice for the eLab teams is that too much capital may be worse than too little resources. That is because creative ideas, inspiration and good business models are often triggered when there just are not enough resources to go around.

For young entrepreneurs, Chang’s advice is to stay healthy, and learn how to become a leader. “Prof Velamuri often asks entrepreneurs, ‘Do you want to be rich, or to be a king?’ Everyone should think about this question,” said Chang. It seems wealth is not his ultimate end game. While in the US, he turned down a US\$5 million investment in KMI because the disruption to his work-life balance would have been too big a price to pay. “Today China’s biggest feature is its hustle and speed. I understand the pressure entrepreneurs face in their struggle to survive and thrive; but still, I hope they can work hard to stay healthy. Life is a marathon, and if you cannot keep yourself healthy, how will you be able to remain in control of your life

for the long haul?” he stressed. He also noted the importance of knowing how to wield the power that comes with success. “The core of western leadership is having influence; it’s not about being in a particular class. Its value lies in sacrifice and service to society, not in power over others and benefits. These ideas are worth our attention,” he said.



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So... riches, or royalty? Chang seems to think that there is no right or wrong answer to the question. However, the twists and turns of the last three decades have taken him on a journey entwined with roads that run the gamut from technology and business, academics and commerce, to teaching and entrepreneurship. His experiences have shaped his life. “Without meaningful work, one cannot live a meaningful life. Success is not necessarily standing on the summit with your crown, success means being resilient. You have to face failure with calm and openness. When you fail, you have to fail forward without compromise. When you succeed again, you should never forget to be humble and thankful.”