

Professor Xu Xiaonian: A favour given is a blessing received



■ By Lei Na

Professor Xu Xiaonian doesn't show his fondness for children with mundane gestures such as the good-natured pinching of a plump infant's cheek. His actions and feelings go a lot deeper. He cannot bear, for example, to see the young and vulnerable hurt in any way. This is a

closely guarded clue to his 'other' life, the tender and gentle *Uncle Xu*, as opposed to the well-known academic and economist extraordinaire *Professor Xu*.

It is this Uncle Xu who still has vivid memories of being in the hospital waiting for word on the condition of two children who were receiving medical treatment in the aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. The boy had lost both his legs and the girl had broken her right leg and arm; together with CEIBS alumni Prof Xu had donated funds to pay for their treatment. As he saw the children being wheeled to him, caught in the moonlight of a chilly Beijing evening, his eyes filled with tears long before he could take them in his arms. "Uncle Xu," were the only words the young girl managed to sigh before her tears came. This is an image that haunts Prof Xu; he simply cannot erase the scene from his mind. He too is a father, and seeing children suffer makes him think of his own daughter. He finds it unbearable to look at pictures the wounded girl took before the earthquake, back when she was "whole". The images reduce him to agonised moans of frustration because there is only so much he can do and no more. He is, after all, a mere mortal.

When we sat down to discuss his acts of kindness, Professor Xu was reluctant

to mention what he does to help those in need. Instead, he would repeatedly emphasise that we should thank the children. It is the trust and appreciation they show, he says, that brings him joy and satisfaction. “When I was in Tibet, I saw the eyes of the children there. They were as pure as the water from a pristine lake,” he recalls. He believes that children are our salvation in a vanity-filled world; that their innocence provides a sanctuary against the vulgarity and fickleness that too often surrounds us.

CEIBS alumnus Deng Fei (EMBA 2013) who is renowned for his many public welfare initiatives, such as the Free Lunch for Children project he founded, has been a beneficiary of Prof Xu’s philanthropy. He helped Deng Fei earn a scholarship to study at CEIBS, and paid the portion of his tuition fees not covered by the scholarship. “If he was an entrepreneur or a corporate executive, I would not have done that, but Deng Fei is a man devoted to the public welfare, so when he could not afford to pay tuition fees, I gave him a hand,” Prof Xu explains.

Though a renowned economist, Prof Xu sometimes goes against the laws of economics when doing things, as if he is still a child at heart, and through his philanthropy he can maintain that child-like hope and innocence. As he explained to *TheLINK* in a recent interview, to him, giving is taking. His philanthropy shows us that wisdom will give birth to kindness, with charity for all, and that a man of wisdom should always be ready to help the needy help themselves.

***TheLINK*: You recommended the book *The Virtue of Selfishness* during a**

speech you gave, and you said that only selfish people can do philanthropy without giving up. Can you explain what you mean by this?

I think that when you are engaged in philanthropic activities there is a paradox, you actually do it for yourself, not merely for the community, you are following your heart. It doesn’t matter whether you get credit or you are criticised. Unless your aim is to arouse public awareness: then you can be high-profile, doing environmental conservation and the like.

Following the “5.12” earthquake, I participated in several philanthropic



activities to help the children in Wenchuan. I did all this for myself. I learned a lot, I was helping myself by helping the children. The children there trust me, they would tell me everything; it is the kind of communication you don't find anywhere else. I have no intention of asking others to do philanthropic works with me; I just want everyone to follow their own heart, to let their conscience be their guide.

TheLINK: You travelled to many remote areas while doing philanthropic work. Are you doing field research on Chinese society at the same time?

It wasn't my goal, but yes I do. When you are actually in the countryside, you almost always find out something new about the local economic situation and provincial life. In fact, this has had an impact on my research. For example, when I went to southern Shaanxi Province, my initial impression was that the local villages were mostly empty, with only the elderly still living there. But I soon met a young man in his twenties. I asked him why he had stayed while everyone else was leaving. He said that he had been working in a mine when one of his fellow workers died in a mining accident. Upon hearing of this death his mother phoned him, and tearfully begged him to return home to stay with her, saying she couldn't bear the thought of losing her son. So he lives at home, though he hasn't made a penny, as he hasn't found a job in the countryside.

A sad story isn't it? To my surprise, the village is not without its advantages. It abounds in natural resources; they produce kiwi fruit and honey, only

they had not found a way to ship their products and sell them to the cities. If they could, the villagers would make money, and urban residents would have natural and healthy food to eat.

TheLINK: Was this the basis of Deng Fei's e-agricultural Programme?

After I returned from the southern Shaanxi countryside, I had the idea to commercialise the e-agriculture Programme. If they could find a way to reach the urban market, the organic agricultural products of southern Shaanxi are sure to sell well. But before this can happen the farmers need to be organised to steadily produce, the products need to be shipped, and they need advertisements. The most important thing is to establish market credibility. We now have many "organic" products in the city, but no one believes in them because there are too many fake and shoddy products. We can use philanthropy to add credibility to agricultural products from southern Shaanxi, the business elite

can make money, but the profits should all go to benefit the local Shaanxi society and its residents.

Volunteers shouldn't always work for free; after all, they've got family to feed and bills to pay. In developed countries philanthropic organisations operate commercially; they do have volunteers working for them, but the permanent institutions are market-oriented. A philanthropic institution differs from a commercial organisation in that its investors do not receive any profit, and the commercial profit is entirely used for public good. We call these organisations social enterprises.

TheLINK: I am aware of some alumni who have embraced the social enterprise concept, for example there is First Respond founded by Lu Le (EMBA 2007), and Xiangxiang Culture which was started by Zhao Xiaojun (EMBA 2005). Their goal is to maximise social benefits, but on the other hand, they are making money.



Professor Xu Xiaonian Receives CEIBS' First Philanthropy Award for Faculty

Professor Xu Xiaonian began his philanthropic activities following the massive earthquake which struck Wenchuan on May 12, 2008. Together with several other professors he donated his time to give a lecture, the proceeds of which were donated to relief efforts for the children in the disaster-stricken area. These lectures were arranged by the CEIBS Alumni Association Sichuan Branch and the CEIBS Love Alliance. On the first anniversary of the earthquake, he and other members of the CEIBS community donated funds to provide medical treatment for several children from the area, and he began to get involved in other philanthropic activities.

Since 2014, Prof Xu has been actively involved with the poverty alleviation ecological project sponsored by CEIBS Alumni and the Chinese Rural Child Illness Insurance Public Welfare Fund Project. His philanthropic work has taken him to Pingli County in Shaanxi Province, Wanshui Mountain Dabie in West Anhui, Kaihua County in Zhejiang and Yangbi County in Yunnan. His efforts have included raising funds for charity projects and visiting the families who have benefited from them, in addition to visiting the schools in the mountain regions where free lunches are offered. During these visits he shares the valuable insights he has gained from his philanthropic work.

In 2016, Prof Xu was the first recipient of the CEIBS Philanthropy Award for Faculty Members. The Award was established to honour faculty members who make outstanding contributions and whose accomplishments can be viewed as models of philanthropy both within and outside the CEIBS community. In line with CEIBS' mission and vision, the school values faculty members' active participation in philanthropic activities, as this promotes corporate social responsibility as well as social development in China.

Do you think there should be more social enterprises?

Pure charity and social enterprise should both be pursued. There are some philanthropic efforts which cannot earn enough to maintain their operations; these can only be pure philanthropy. However some projects, such as the e-agricultural Programme, are profitable. These social enterprises can improve the effectiveness of philanthropy, as their commercial operation is more efficient, and costs less than the administrative operation.

***TheLINK*: It is said that when a country's per capita GDP reaches US\$8,000, the elite will return home. Do you think this will happen in China?**

I have observed two trends: city dwellers travel to the country, while people from the countryside go to the city. Urbanites go to the countryside for vacation; the rural residents go to the city for jobs. I haven't seen many urbanites go to the countryside to settle down. Our country's urbanisation is not finished; so rural residents will continue to pour into the cities.

This has resulted in many social problems. Parents work in the city (there are even instances where parents are living and working in two different cities) while children stay in the countryside; both suffer from the absence of their loved ones, and a family reunion is only possible when the parents can save a

small amount of money. Sometimes the absence is so profound that it has an irrevocable influence on these relationships; some children even commit suicide, as they feel their life is just too gloomy.

On one hand, the farmers who come to the city cannot afford the high cost of housing and medical treatment, so they have to leave their children in the countryside. On the other hand, the economic development in rural areas is so slow and social reform there is lagging behind, which causes social problems. Seeing these impoverished areas, I can't help but feel helpless and upset. I realise that what I can do barely covers all their needs; I'm only doing what I can to soothe my own conscience.

***TheLINK:* But if the migrant workers bring their children into the city, will they take up the resources such as schooling and medical care that previously belonged to the city residents? Isn't it a bit unfair to the city residents?**

I don't think so. The farmers came to the city; they worked and paid taxes in the city as well. In the United States, if a person lives in a place regularly for more than a year, he is treated equally – in every aspect – to the other residents of the state. Why shouldn't Beijing and Shanghai do the same? If one year is not enough, then make it two; if not two years, three. After paying taxes for three years he becomes

a lawful resident. This would be just, and fair. In any case, the authorities should give hope to those who migrated into the city. If the city keeps taxing someone year after year, while denying his lawful right of having residency, is that fair for him and his family?

I think it is not about justice, but about fiscal expenditure. Today fiscal spending mainly goes into large-scale construction projects; this gives the impression that officials are doing a good job, and also creates opportunity for corruption. People's livelihoods have always been the weak link of fiscal expenditure, if the financial mechanism remains unchanged, there is no way that the problems in public facilities and public services caused by rapid urbanisation can be solved.

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