

HO MING-TEH

Ho Ming-teh was born on 2 April 1922 in Minhsiung Township, Chiayi County, Taiwan.* His childhood and youth occurred during the final years of the long colonial occupation of Taiwan by Japan; Japan had wrested the island from China in 1895. His father, Chen Shih, traced his roots, several generations back, to Fujian (Fuchien) Province in China and still spoke the provincial dialect, which is often called Hokkien. In Minhsiung Township, Chen Shih owned a farm of six acres on which he grew sugarcane for a Japanese-owned mill as well as rice and vegetables for the family.

Ho was born not as Ho Ming-teh but as Chen Ming-teh. Chen was his mother's family name. In accordance with Chinese custom, his father had taken the family name Chen when he married Ming-teh's mother. Her parents possessed land but had no son. As a son-in-law and adopted "son," Chen Shih worked the Chen family's six acres of land and subsequently inherited it. When Ming-teh was later married and had a son of his own, however, custom dictated that he reclaim his father's original surname of Ho. Thus, Chen Ming-teh eventually became Ho Ming-teh.

Ho Ming-teh's mother, Chen Tsui, also traced her family to Fujian Province. Hers was a hard life. She prepared and cooked food for everyone in the household, including not only herself and her husband and seven children but also two full-time workers who helped out on the farm. This and all the other chores of managing a large rural household required that she rise at three o'clock every morning, a fact that Ho remembered all his life.

Despite the hard work and the rural simplicity of their lives, the Chens were not poor. Theirs was a middle-level family. Their farm was relatively large. They occupied a house made of clay and bamboo, with a roof made of dried rice stalks. And they owned a water buffalo and raised chickens and pigs to sell. But Ho remembered that they did not have much money to speak of. They could not afford to eat the chickens and pigs they raised, for example. Instead, the family diet consisted mainly of the rice and vegetables they grew themselves, along with fish from nearby rivers and streams. Everyone slept in one big room.

* In this essay, the Wade-Giles romanization system has been used for Chinese proper nouns in Taiwan and the pinyin system for those in the People's Republic of China. In some cases, both systems have been used.

The Ho farm was ten minutes by car from Chiayi City, the county seat. But when Ho was a boy, the family did not own a car and traveled everywhere by foot or by the family bicycle, a vehicle that everyone shared. Even such a bicycle was rare in the village and a mark of distinction. Only one other family had one.

Ho began his education in the village at Lin Tzu Wei Elementary School, which was one hour away by foot. Even in winter he walked barefoot to school, following the railroad lines, and put on his one precious pair of shoes only after arriving in class. There were only sixty pupils in the entire school. The language of instruction was Japanese, a sign of Japan's colonial presence. Moreover, all the teachers were Japanese men (as were Chiayi's police officers). Ho remembers that his teachers were very strict and practiced corporal punishment. Aside from the usual grammar-school subjects, he and his classmates were instructed in "civics," to promote loyalty to Japan. A Japanese imperial flag flew over the schoolhouse. (To assure that he would learn Chinese, for fourth grade Ho's father sent him to a private Chinese-language school instead.) Ho enjoyed school as a boy and says that he was aware even then that attending school was a privilege. In his county, only one family in twenty could afford to educate its children. In the afternoons and evenings after school, Ho helped out on the family farm by tending the water buffalo and other animals and by catching fish.

For sixth grade, Ho transferred to Chiayi Tung Men Public School in Chiayi City to prepare for the examinations that opened the door to high school in Taipei. A teacher there, a Mr. Watanabe, befriended him and even welcomed him at home. Watanabe encouraged Ho to study civil engineering and told him that, as an engineer, he would have a bright future in Taiwan. Ho took this advice seriously and, after passing his qualifying examinations, embarked upon a two-year course in civil engineering at a private high school in Taipei: the Taipei Survey School (now the Juifang Industrial Vocational High School). This privilege was accorded to him by his father because he was the eldest son; Ho's sisters, two of whom were older than he was, were not educated beyond elementary school.

Ho was only sixteen years old when he finished his engineering course and took a job with the Chianan Irrigation Association, a semi-private agency that allocated water to Taiwan's farms and agribusinesses and collected water taxes and fees. All the senior managers in the agency were Japanese, usually retired government officials, and the office language was strictly Japanese. Ho was one of several Japanese-speaking junior assistants who were Taiwanese. In Taiwan at that time, merely to work in a Japanese office was considered a mark of success. Ho's father boasted about him to the neighbors and Ho himself appreciated the opportunities he had been given by both his teachers and employers. This set him apart from many Taiwanese who bitterly resented the occupiers.

Ho applied himself and worked hard. In 1943, after four years on the job, he was selected to attend the Tainan Agriculture and Civil Engineering Institute. By this time, war was raging throughout Asia and Japan had acquired several new colonies in Southeast Asia. At the Institute, Ho and his classmates were trained to become postwar civil administrators in Japan's new empire. Had the Japanese won the war, Ho would very likely have been posted as an official in Malaya, the Philippines, or Indonesia. War was still raging when Ho finished his one-year training, however, and he was simply reassigned to Chiayi. He took a room in town and bicycled from site to site to supervise the agency's local irrigation projects.

Although not a battlefield, Taiwan did not escape the exigencies of war. Food was scarce, as Japan drained the island of rice and other foodstuffs to feed its far-flung armies. Moreover, after Japan attacked China in 1937, Taiwan was subject sporadically to retaliatory Chinese bombing. Living in his school dormitory in Taipei at the time, Ho was aware of such bombings but did not witness them. As the war deepened, and especially after the United States joined the war against Japan, the bombing intensified. Toward the end of the war, the United States bombed Taiwan heavily. As the site of an airport, Chiayi County was not spared. Many people there fled to the mountains to escape the mayhem and danger.

It was in the midst of these troubled times, in March 1943, that Ho Ming-teh married Li Chiu-liang. His parents had been pressuring him to marry since his eighteenth birthday and he was now nearly twenty-one. He had resisted in part because of the war and the ever-present threat of conscription. When he finally relented, a matchmaker was called in to find an appropriate spouse. The newly wedded couple moved into rooms at the local Chianan Irrigation Association office in Chiayi. Their first child, a daughter, Chen Mei-chih, was born in 1944. (When a son, Ho Li-chung, was born in 1947, Ho reverted to the surname of his father. Two more daughters, Chen Mei-ju and Ho Ying-chen, followed in 1951 and 1953, respectively. A second son, Ho Chung-chen, did not survive.)

Although many young men from Taiwan were drafted during the war, including Ho's brother, who served as a captain in the Japanese Royal Navy, Ho himself was not called up until war's end—and by then it was too late. By early 1945, it was clear to everyone in Taiwan that Japan was going to lose the war. People noticed, for example, that Japanese machine guns could not touch the American planes that now flew freely over the island.

War's end brought relief. All of Ho's family survived and, moreover, Japan's long occupation was now at an end. Along with most Taiwanese, Ho was happy that the Chinese would soon come to recover Taiwan. But he was disturbed by events that occurred during the unsettled months following the armistice, when former Japanese police officers

who had been stranded in Taiwan (for lack of ready transportation home) suffered reprisals at the hands of angry islanders. In Chiayi, he said, some Japanese officers were beaten and left to die.

The transition to Chinese rule was troubled and marked by violence. Forces affiliated with the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) government of Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) soon occupied Taiwan. In Chiayi, there were confrontations between local people and the incoming soldiers, who behaved roughly and seized goods from local merchants. When the Nationalists sent more troops and declared martial law in 1947, Taiwanese youths in Chiayi fought back furiously as part of the general anti-Guomindang rebellion of that year. The Guomindang asserted its authority brutally and in Chiayi, as Ho vividly remembered, murdered some local leaders. During the troubles, he fled with his wife and children to the old family house in the countryside.

Under Guomindang management, the Chianan Irrigation Association foundered; even though Ho himself was promoted to engineer he was not being paid. He left the agency in 1947. After working briefly for a factory in Chiayi, he struck out on his own and opened a grocery store, a line of business that required little capital. He rented a small storefront in the center of downtown Chiayi near the railway station and began by selling groceries on consignment. He stocked alcohol, cigarettes, sugar, salt, soap, bean sauce, and stamps and also served as an unofficial local postmaster. The family lived at the back of the store in the same building. Ho worked long hours but enjoyed the work and gained a good reputation for paying his suppliers promptly. He prospered. In the 1950s, he was able to expand his business and to purchase the building housing his store as well as a handful of others in the neighborhood.

All this effort was directed toward providing a good education for his four children, something Ho insisted upon (and ultimately achieved). To this end, he and his wife worked from six o'clock in the morning to midnight every day of the year, year after year. The family economized by preparing hot lunches at home and taking them to the children at school. Eventually, Ho also gave up smoking and drinking in an effort to save money for his children's schooling. Ho and Chiu-liang ran the store together for twenty-three years, until Ho was seventy. Afterwards, they rented the space to a restaurant and covered their now more modest expenses from rental income.

It was during Ho Ming-teh's long years as a shopkeeper that he turned to Buddhism. His parents had been Taoists (Daoists) and made sacrifices and offerings to certain gods and to the family ancestors. There was a shrine in the house and every year, on the birthday of the senior deity, family members entreated it with incense and food (which they subsequently ate themselves). Chiayi, however, was an important center of Buddhism. Its Fo Guang Shan Buddhist temple was a major pilgrimage site that drew visitors to Chiayi from all over Taiwan. In 1963, Ho's friend Chen Chia-nung, who supplied the town's shrines and shops

with incense, gave Ho some Buddhist tracts to read. He immediately took an interest. Thus began his intense involvement with Buddhism, the study of which would engage him for the rest of his life.

Spurning monks and formal teachers, Ho approached Buddhism entirely through self-study and ascetic practices. He steeped himself in the Buddhist sutras and practiced meditation and t'ai chi ch'uan. For many years, he ate nothing but fruit. (Ho's preference was for sweet fruits but, since "as a Buddhist, you don't choose," he ate only what was readily at hand season by season. In Chiayi this included pineapple, grapes, papaya, mango, lychees, and dragon eyes.) "You have to control yourself," he concluded, "and live a very simple life and eat very simple things." Moreover, avoiding meat expressed "a kind of universal love, including love for animals." Despite his asceticism, Ho had no desire to become a monk or even to worship regularly at a shrine, nor did he impose his ascetic practices and strict diet on the rest of his family. What he came truly to believe was that, to be a good Buddhist, one had simply to practice Buddhism. And one did that by doing good.

Ho acted on this conviction in many small ways, including helping to renovate the local You Tien Kung Temple. But beginning in 1968, he expanded his endeavors. In that year, a friend of his was badly hurt when his motorcycle hit a pothole and crashed. Potholes were common enough in the streets of Chiayi County, but they were supposed to be covered with steel plates. Alas, the plates were valuable and people sometimes stole them. After his friend's accident, Ho mobilized some family members and friends to repair the road at the site of the accident and, afterwards, to fix other dangerous spots around town. As he did so, he developed a secretive *modus operandi*. He and his crew of volunteers waited until after midnight and then set to work in the absence of traffic and in the anonymity of darkness—patching roads, covering potholes with metal plates, and replacing the worn-out wooden planks on old suspension bridges. One clandestine project led to another, as Ho heard about other roads and bridges needing repair. Ho covered the expenses through small donations. Thus did his community work begin, quietly.

In 1971, a tragic accident stirred Ho to enlarge these efforts. Two brothers, eight and ten years old, were crossing a bamboo bridge in Chungpu Township of Chiayi County during a rainstorm. The younger brother slipped from the rickety bridge and fell into the swollen river. His older brother jumped into the river to save him. Both boys drowned. Ho realized that the cause of this tragedy was the decrepit bamboo bridge. With donations from Chiayi's Buddhist community and the help of "thirty or forty volunteers," as he later recalled, he set about constructing a new one. As a former engineer, Ho designed the new bridge himself. Then he and his friends and volunteers assembled the necessary materials and built it. The ten-meter-long steel-girder and wood-plank bridge, named Hui Sheng (Given by God), soon stood on the site where the two brothers died.

After the Hui Sheng Bridge was built, people from the neighboring village of Tse Lung approached Ho for his help. The children of the village were accustomed to walking across a riverbed on the way to and from school, a riverbed that became dangerous during the rainy season when the waters rose precipitously.

In launching a second bridge, Ho pledged that each bridge he built would be better than the last one. To symbolize this, the bridge at Tse Lung Village—a cement bridge—was called Jen Hui, using the first word of the name of the first bridge as the second word in the name of the next one. Ho's third bridge was called Feng Jen, and so on. Ho designed each bridge himself and led the volunteers who built it.

By word of mouth, Ho's good deeds became known and one bridge soon led to another and yet another. Still, he could not very well build bridges everywhere he pleased. Bridges, like other public structures, are subject to building codes, right-of-way agreements, zoning restrictions, and other regulations. Ho therefore developed a simple strategy to deal with this: in responding to requests from villages, he relied upon the local people themselves to settle such issues prior to launching a new project. In fact, most requests came from village council members or mayors, making the resolution of potential problems relatively easy.

Building bridges required more physical strength and stamina than running a shop. The fruit-only diet that Ho had followed for years was no longer sufficient. Ho grew thinner and weaker and his children worried about his health. After praying for guidance, Ho adopted a new diet of vegetables and rice—still avoiding meats altogether.

In time, Ho and his volunteers were building ten bridges or more a year. They did so entirely from donations, asking no payment at all from the recipient communities. In this manner, his projects helped to compensate for inadequate government budgets and bureaucratic foot-dragging. At the same time, they made positive improvements to Chiayi County and some adjacent townships, upgrading the rural infrastructure, improving access for farmers to markets, and promoting tourism. With these changes came new hope and vigor.

To do good, Ho believed, is the source of happiness. He therefore organized his bridge-building efforts to involve ever greater numbers of people, so that they too could "enjoy happiness." Even poor people can afford to do good, he liked to say. One strategy he employed was to limit individual donations to a maximum of thirty New Taiwan dollars per project, a limit he gradually raised to one hundred New Taiwan dollars. Each donor also committed himself or herself to at least one day of work on the project. As his bridges became structurally more ambitious and costly, Ho and his team simply brought in more donors until they collected the money they needed. After that, they accepted no more donations.

Volunteers collected the donations and delivered them, along with the names of the contributors, directly to Ho. He then made a record of

everything. Indeed, Ho made a habit of keeping separate accounting records for each bridge, scrupulously recording each individual contribution by name and then, as the project progressed, recording how much money was spent for steel and cement and everything else needed to build the bridge. He distributed these records to all the participants periodically. Meanwhile, a three-person committee approved each expense. All this reinforced his reputation for integrity. To symbolize the fact that each new bridge represented a distinct "deed," Ho had contributors sign their names on slips of red paper at the beginning of each project. When the bridge was finished, all the slips of paper were burned. "This is a good way of sending a message to the gods," he said.

In keeping with Ho's one-bridge-at-a-time concept, undisbursed funds for one bridge were not rolled over to the next bridge but contributed to some other charitable cause. (Generally, this money went to help poor families pay burial costs. But not always. On one occasion, Ho's surplus bridge funds paid for a town's new fire engine.) Even so, when Ho circulated the final report itemizing the expenses of one bridge, he would include an announcement about the next bridge, along with a solicitation. Recipients of the accounting reports would often invite other people to join in, increasing the number of donors and volunteers eventually to two hundred thousand people.

Ho valued anonymity and never solicited donations in magazines or newspapers. Everything was done by word of mouth and by the reports and solicitations Ho circulated quietly among the participants. Indeed, in his early years of making clandestine nighttime road repairs, when curious reporters managed to catch him at work, he and his helpers refused to give their names. Ho made a practice of avoiding reporters not only because he did not want publicity but also because he did not want people using his name to collect money.

But as Ho's bridges increased in number and size, it became impossible to escape attention, especially when leaders of a town or village invited newspaper and television reporters to cover the inaugurations of their newly built bridges. So the work of Ho and his group gradually became known to many people. Finally, the newspapers came up with a name for Ho and his band of helpers: the Chiayi Philanthropy Group. This is the name that stuck. By the time Ho had reached his one-hundredth bridge in 1982, he had adopted the name himself (and even used a variation of it in naming the milestone bridge).

In fact, however, Ho's group had no fixed members and, despite many busy volunteers and a few ad hoc committees, had no formal organization at all. Nor did it possess a charter or set of bylaws. Ho and his wife managed the group's activities themselves, with the help of their eldest daughter and son-in-law and a circle of ten or so stalwart families.

As Ho's bridges became larger (the longest is 105 meters), he hired specialists to operate large earthmovers and other heavy equipment, often persuading the contractors to donate their services. It was on

Sundays that Ho and his volunteers went to work, traveling together to the construction site and working hard but festively all day long. Ho himself never missed a Sunday and even forfeited attending two of his daughters' wedding celebrations to build bridges. Typically, the group included the old and young alike, men and women, and even children who tagged along and played nearby as their parents, week by week, measured and marked the site, hammered and sawed and assembled a frame, mixed and poured the concrete, and, at project's end, cleaned and painted the finished bridge. Ho's volunteers gathered each week rain or shine since, by lore, the rain would invariably abate when volunteers reached the site. They took this as a sign that their patron spirit Chi Kung (the god of bridge building, whose temple rests in Chiayi) was watching over them and bestowing his blessing.

Evidently, he was. By 1995, Ho's Chiayi Philanthropy Group had completed 215 bridges in Chiayi and neighboring Yünlin and Tainan Counties. This is good, Ho said, not only because of the material benefits the bridges bring but also because a good deed is an end in itself, especially when given without concern for profit or status or one's good name. By doing good deeds, he says, one can improve one's character and "be blessed by Heaven."

This thought lies at the heart of Ho's work. His Chiayi Philanthropy Group is not guided by any charter, he says, but it is guided by four convictions. These are: (1) to do good deeds is to thank Heaven and Earth who create human beings; (2) to do good is to reciprocate the favor of the state and protect the lives and properties of our fellow people; (3) to do good is to benefit society and enhance people's well-being; and (4) to do good is to invoke Heaven's blessings, accumulate happiness, be rid of worldly distractions, and glorify our forebears.

Note: Ho Ming-teh died on 1 February 1998 at the age of seventy-five.

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