



PRINT CLOSE

## Giving something back after reaping rewards

### Henry To Siu-ki turned his back on his own business empire to help needy would-be entrepreneurs

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Henry To Siu-ki is a long way from where he started his career - dabbling in toy manufacturing 25 years ago. The 54-year-old Hong Kong-born entrepreneur entered the mainland business market by setting up a toy factory in Shenzhen before

expanding the business to other cities in Guangdong, such as Dongguan .

After two years, his ambition led him to set up a lights-manufacturing plant in Zhongshan , and the goods from his factories were soon being exported around the world. That year, 1989, also saw him move to the US to further expand his operations. He stayed for almost a decade, but in 1998 he thought it was time for a life change, and two years later he found himself abandoning his business and returning to China. But he didn't have manufacturing in mind. This time he set his sights on educating others. Today, he is president of the Chinese Peter F Drucker Academy, which focuses on teaching management skills to would-be business executives. And he is also chief executive officer of the Bright China Foundation - like the Drucker Academy a member of the Bright China Group. He has launched various charity projects, ranging from educating poor children in remote

rural areas to rehabilitating prisoners by teaching them to set up businesses.

**Why did you return to China after staying in the US for so long?** I had quite a good business in both China and the US in 1998, but I was not sure about what to do next. I started thinking about it, and I set three goals for my future. I wanted to disseminate my business knowledge and experience to others, I wanted to focus on education and I wanted to serve China. Once I had set these three paths, I started to hand my business over to my (brothers and) partners, and I made concrete plans to achieve these three aims. I did not want to wait a long time, because the Bible says one should not put his hand to the plough and look back. Two years later [in 2000], I returned to China to explore what I could do for the country, and I started working things out in 2003.

### **What did you do first when you returned to China?**

I landed in Beijing and started teaching mainlanders how to set up their own business. The country was hit by the Sars crisis in 2003, and some people were looking for alternative career paths. Some of my students were from the underprivileged class, including some security guards. They came to my three-hour class every day; it was very touching.

I had only two full-time staff members at first, but I later trained 15 and had about 300 volunteers who taught the entrepreneurship programme in other places, such as Yunnan , Sichuan , Guizhou and Shaanxi provinces. Many people in these provinces wanted to start their own business, but they lacked proper direction and ended up losing money.

### **What type of impact did your initial experiences have on you?**

I got to learn more about the lack of educational opportunities in remote places in the country. Many children did not attend school because their parents were poor, so we launched a scholarship programme for the poor kids. While we were focusing on helping these kids, officials from the Sichuan judicial authority asked us whether we could help train inmates, and that's when we received access to the prisons.

**What do you actually teach the inmates?** Some business concepts, such as finding opportunities amid problems, cost calculations and supply-and-demand theory. Most of the inmates are aged 30 to 40 and have undergone some other training provided by the prisons. However, employers are still reluctant to hire them when they are released, and they still have low self-esteem. In the class, our teachers pose some open-ended questions to the inmates and engage them in mock business deals. For example, students may be divided into two groups, playing the role of manufacturers and buyers, to negotiate a supply deal. In order to boost their confidence, our teachers won't just tell them that something is "wrong", but rather analyse the pros and cons of the ideas the students put forth.

**Are there follow-up services after the classes?** Before the graduation ceremony at the end of the class, each student will, while taking up the role of a company chairman, present a business proposal. Their fellow inmates provide feedback, and some students break down in tears because they get very much into the role of the company chairman - it gives them dignity. And if their business plan is feasible, we give them a loan of between 20,000 yuan (HK\$24,500) and 50,000 yuan, at an interest rate that is between 5 and 7 per cent a year. Some inmates have started second-hand mobile phone shops and laundry businesses with our loans after serving their sentences.

**How many inmates have received your training?** We have provided similar programs in Jiangsu , Zhejiang , Beijing and Shanghai. So far, about 6,000 inmates have attended our classes.

**What has been your most memorable experience?** We also provided similar training to underprivileged people. Several years ago, the girl of a single-parent family attended our training and made a business proposal to set up a salad bar. We found the proposal appealing and submitted it for a global business-plan award in the US in 2003. Her plan was short-listed, and one year later, together with me and her mother, the girl went to New York to get the award. The girl was transformed after that trip, during which she also discussed her plan with US business people. She became more self-confident, was admitted to university, participated in student groups and was offered a job by a German company before graduation. Her life was changed because of my training. Her story has also motivated me.

**Is the government supportive of what you have been doing?**

Yes, they do support us. When we first launched our service, there were some local government officials demanding that they receive personal benefits [as a result of our efforts]. In such cases, we would leave [those areas]. But over the years, we have learned how to deal with government officials. We let the local governments take credit for improving the lives of their own people.

**Have you ever struggled and thought of giving up and returning to the US?**

Yes, I have, and sometimes I need courage to continue with what I want to do. Walking along the hills and in remote village is very difficult. I hiked for three hours to reach a family in Nujiang , Yunnan, after a 12-hour bus ride from Kunming . Riding on an overnight bus is not a pleasant experience, even if the bus were to have had a mattress and pillows. Sometimes you could smell the feet of the passenger sleeping next to you, especially when it was raining and the windows were all shut. There was no air conditioning. My family lives in Los Angeles, and I miss them. Sometimes I will wonder why on earth I gave up my respectable US business career to return to China, where I need to ask for donations. If my wife told me that she needed me back to Los Angeles, I would do what she wanted. But luckily, my family is supportive of me.

**What is your plan for the future?** I will focus on education, which empowers people to help themselves and regain their dignity, and I want to make other non-governmental organisations in China more capable of helping people.