The Great Wall Challenge

In February 2003, Associate Professor Michael Heng was appointed the International Consultant by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a United Nations agency, for a high-level consultancy project for the People Republic of China (PRC). He has previously been involved in high-level consultancy assignments for the governments of Canada and Vietnam.

What is the nature of the PRC consultancy assignment?

This is the first meeting by tripartite partners – PRC government, trade unions and employers’ organisations – to discuss the structure and process of tripartite social dialogue that the Chinese government is keen to embrace. The participants included the Ministry of Labour and Social Services (MOISSL), Beijing City People’s Committee, senior central and provincial government officials, senior officials from the All-China Confederation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) and senior officials of various employers and business federations.

How do you feel about the latest appointment?

I am again humbled by the privilege to facilitate a historic event that could define permanently the labour relations landscape of a huge country like China. The opportunity to work with 3 highly competent and knowledgeable senior ILO officials of various nationalities provides much room for sharing and mutual learning, leaving me rather refreshed and energised after the PRC assignment in February 2003. I am looking forward to participate in the follow-up events to be held in Beijing, Xianmen, Dalian and other major cities over the next few months.

Do you consider yourself to be a “talent”?

Not in the current conventional sense of the word. I have over the years developed a set of unique competencies that I applied with some impact in unusual situations that are rather unconventional and often out of the ordinary. In many of my high-level consulting assignments, whether with business organisations or with international agencies like the ILO, I feel continually challenged intellectually to unleash creativity to adapt my knowledge and experience to fit into the unthinkable circumstances. I find such challenges intriguing and refreshing. The recent China assignment is in line with what I shall refer to as the "Great Wall Challenge" to my calling and life purpose.

Why the Great Wall analogy?

As I walked a section of the Great Wall at Juyongguan Pass, which is near the Ming Tombs just outside Beijing, I was struck by its tremendous architecture, but more by its place and impact on the historical developments of the world.

The relatively simple concept of a defensive "wall" to deter marauding barbarians from the North was in fact responsible for the subsequent survival and growth of the Chinese civilization within the world history for nearly 2,000 years. It is a clear example of the kind of impact that one can and should expect from the deployment of ordinary talent.

What is the relevance of the Great Wall of China to the growing of talent?

Let me elaborate. The Huns, who are the forerunners of the Mongols, emerged from the 3rd century BC in the north of China but were unable to seriously threaten China in the South because of the Great Wall. As a result, the Huns eventually turned their attention northward toward Russia and westward towards Eastern Europe.

During the beginning of the first century AD, the Huns swept across Asia. They invaded the lower Volga valley and advanced westward, pushing the Germanic Ostrogoths and Visigoths before them and thus precipitating the great waves of migrations that destroyed the Roman Empire and changed the face of Europe. They crossed the Danube, penetrated deep into the Eastern Empire, and forced many countries to pay them tribute. Attila the Hun, their greatest king, had his palace in Hungary. Most of the territories that now constitute European Russia, Poland, and Germany were tributary to him, and he was collecting tribute from Rome as Roman general in chief. When Rome refused to pay further tribute, the Huns invaded Italy and Gaul and were defeated, but they ravaged Italy before withdrawing after Attila’s death.

Their descendants, the Mongols, returned to invade Europe after they had conquered China in 1215 AD, and remaining in Europe until the late 1400s AD. The rest is history.

Historians agreed that, if the Chin Emperor Shi Huangdi did not build the Great Wall, and the Huns had continued to attack China and conquered it 1,000 years earlier, Europe could very well have been spared the dire consequences of the Huns invasion and developed along very different tracks and at possibly quicker pace.

However, the ‘simple’ Great Wall of China has changed fundamentally the course of European history, and perhaps hastens the Renaissance and Reformation events, which saw the emergence of great scientific inventions that have made modernity possible.

What then constitute the “Great Wall Challenge” for those who regard themselves as “talent”?

I see the narrow emphasis of ‘talent’ - as in just measuring individual attainments by way of grades, classes of honours, and doing more of the same things - to be an immature understanding of the expectations of ‘talent’. Talent without impact is like erecting a simple wooden fence with interesting patterns and designs without purpose other than to satisfy the whims of its builder.

True talent, whether in school, academia and research, must be nurtured and cultivated with great purpose and meaningful impact in mind, often with the single-minded goal of obtaining impact from the ‘talent’ in a manner that makes significant differences and positive change in the life of other people, the community, society, nation and, in its widest effect, the world.

In short, “talent” is only indicative by the show of personal attainments, but confirmed ultimately by the measure of impact. The “fruits” of talent, when delivered by impactful outcomes, are certainly more important than the mere possession of it.

What are your next steps along the “Great Wall”?

Cambodia is next. As some follow-up assignments to Vietnam and China are postponed because of SARS, I have been sought for a new high-level consulting assignment...this time to Cambodia, another totally ‘virgin’ country with hardly any experience in industry, commerce and labour relations. This is really my kind of learning setting. It is also my first appointment by the International Organisation of Employers (IOE). The IOE is the only organisation at the international level that represents the interests of business in the labour and social policy fields. Today, it consists of 206 national employer organisations from 193 countries all over the world. The IOE provides the Secretariat to the ILO Employers’ Group in all its various activities and pursues a number of policy priorities within the ILO.

The high-level strategy consulting assignment requires me to embark on a field trip in July 2003. The mission focus is to identify and map the challenges and prospects facing the Cambodian Federation of Employers’ and Business Associations (CAMFEDA), and to guide the development of appropriate action plans to engage the key issues over the next 3-5 years in a subsequent high-level CAMFEDA Strategy Workshop scheduled for August 2003. I am eager to start on this new and fresh challenge.