

# In memory of Academician Mengchao Wu, the pioneer of Chinese hepatobiliary surgery

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I have two important reasons for writing this. First, I want to commemorate the Academician Mengchao Wu I knew – a venerable man who, though gone, has left behind a spirit that will continue to inspire people forever. He was a man of conviction with a resolute sense of his mission; he brought honor to his country and his generation. Second, I want people to know about his contributions, character, teachings, and influence and see them as a legacy to be embraced and passed down to younger generations as a beacon and stars that light the way and continue to shine into the future.

Received: 16 June 2021  
Accepted: 17 June 2021



Academician Mengchao Wu (left) and Academician Xiaoping Chen (right)

On May 22, 2021, Academician Mengchao Wu passed away in Shanghai. Words can't even begin to describe the grief I felt when I heard the news. Thoughts churned inside my mind in the middle of night. The memories of our friendship had never been so clear. There is a Chinese saying: “No matter whom you meet, he is destined to appear in your life; there are no coincidences.” Some people are born to be a beam of light – admired, respected, and followed by others. Mengchao Wu was one of those people.

Academician Wu once said, “What concerns me most is that others look down on us Chinese people. Because humiliation is rampant overseas, the country should be strengthened.” He was an overseas Chinese residing in Malaysia. An impoverished country where the people were weak brought him bitter anguish. After the outbreak of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, the Chinese living in Malaysia fervently discussed the decision by the Communist Party of China (CPC) to resist the Japanese invaders and Party members' heroic deeds

in combat. Ever patriotic, Academician Wu resolutely vowed to return to China to join the national efforts in fighting against the Japanese invaders. Unfortunately, battles and turmoil prevented him from going to Yan'an (the base of the CPC then), so he decided to “save the country through education” and applied to the School of Medicine of Tongji University. His affectionate love for the country and his unwavering determination to serve the country supported him throughout his entire life. His selfless devotion to China's medical development made him a legend. I often encourage young doctors by telling them that only when intellectuals integrate their own pursuits into the nation's great causes will they make the best use of their knowledge and ultimately have successful careers. This epiphany inspired by Academician Mengchao Wu has stood the test of time.

In 2011, Wu received the Moving China award. At the ceremony, he was praised for “having an undying flame of passion that ever guides him to fulfill his oath; this flame has been ever burning and has never been put out.” This aptly described the academician, a man of faith who carved out his career as needed by the country and the people. He once said, “I made three right decisions in my life: “returning to China, joining the army, and joining the Party. By going back to my motherland, my aspiration took root in the soil; by dedicating myself to medical science, I had an ideal to strive for; by becoming a Party member, I had a lofty ambition to guide me; by joining the army, I had a great school to teach me.” In 1956, after applying 19 times with the faith and enthusiasm of a communist fighter, Wu was finally approved to join the CPC. From that moment, he began to fulfill his commitments to the Party. His original aspiration remained unchanged for 65 years.

In the early 1950s, Mengchao Wu asked his mentor Fazu Qiu about his future career. Professor Qiu told him, “There is little development in hepatobiliary surgery in China. You might seek progress in this direction.” At that time, hepatobiliary surgery was an uncharted territory in China, a specialty eschewed by many because patients could easily die from heavy bleeding during the operations. Yet Mengchao Wu did not hesitate when Professor Qiu asked him to lead a three-person team committed to solving the technical problems associated with hepatobiliary surgery. That three-person research team has since developed into the largest professional institute of liver surgery, hepatobiliary clinic, and scientific research. Most theories and techniques for surgical treatment of liver cancer were created in China. Over the decades, Academician Mengchao Wu achieved numerous firsts in hepatobiliary surgery in China and worldwide. He helped build China’s prepotency in hepatobiliary surgery from the ground up, embodying the quest for excellence in the field as the pioneer of Chinese hepatobiliary surgery. In 2005, he won the State Supreme Science and Technology Award of China. Academician Mengchao Wu epitomizes the professional ethics and bright future of Chinese medical science. I am honored to carry forward my esteemed colleague’s precious spiritual legacy.

Academician Wu’s beloved mentor Professor Qiu and him – the father of Chinese hepatobiliary surgery and the master of Chinese surgery, respectively – shared many common traits and experiences that touched many people’s hearts and lives. In them, I see unwavering dedication to the medical cause and the well-being of humankind. Such undistracted devotion is priceless and deeply moving. Professor Qiu once commended Academician Wu: “He is a man of great virtue in that he loves his wife, respects his teachers, and works very hard.” Academician Qiu was eight years older than Academician Wu. When Academician Qiu turned ninety, Academician Mengchao Wu was in his eighties, yet we often saw Academician Wu voluntarily supporting Qiu to walk in public, a touching scene and a lesson for us all. His respect for his teacher was evident in every moment he spent with his teacher, a respect that came from the bottom of his heart. His reverence profoundly impressed me and was praised widely in the medical circle. We Chinese have a saying: “The country will be prosperous if teachers are respected and honored.” Their deep and abiding mentor-student relationship embodied the profound and time-honored humanistic spirit of the Chinese nation and should be a model for us all.



Academician Wu was committed to assimilating Professor Qiu’s medical knowledge, ethics, and skills. One of the walls in Academician Wu’s office was adorned with a motto by Professor Qiu that read, “Able to speak, able to do, and able to write.” At the end of 2017, Wu led a team at the seventh session of the Chinese branch of the International Hepato-Pancreato-Biliary Association, which also marked the Second Seminar on Fazu Qiu’s academic thinking. At the event, speaking to top hepato-pancreato-biliary experts in China, Wu said that by discussing the latest developments and cutting-edge technologies in China and pooling their strengths to improve the diagnosis and treatment of such diseases, they were practicing Academician Fazu Qiu’s teachings and repaying him for what he had done for the development of Chinese surgery. Academician Wu did the same throughout his life. He had more than mastered Professor Qiu’s surgical skills, yet he always drove himself to learn more, and he instilled in me the importance of passing on our skills and knowledge.

Academician Wu frequently emphasized the importance of cultivating young talent. He hoped his students would become more



than just doctors who only perform operations and continue to pursue excellence and become true masters. He said that the healthy development of Chinese hepatobiliary surgery depended on the next generation. If young people do well, there is great cause for hope. He groomed and influenced many high-caliber professionals with his knowledge and virtues. He imparted knowledge, but, more importantly, he taught us ethics – not only by teaching and lecturing but by making himself an example for students. He accomplished each task meticulously, no matter how trivial it was or how easily overlooked. By succeeding at even the most menial of tasks, he helped young people internalize the correct values and perceptions of life on which their futures rely. Academician Wu mentored and guided four generations of students. Most of the doctors and

post-doctors he mentored have become the quintessence of liver surgery in China.

When I was a student, “Mengchao Wu” was already a famous name. He was a great professor in our eyes, yet he was disarmingly humble. My first contact with Professor Wu was in December 1985, when my doctoral dissertation defense was scheduled, and I was asked to pick him up at the Wangjiadun Airport. I was young and tended to judge people from their appearance. He was a soldier, so I presumed that he would be tall and strongly built. I waited for a long time at the airport exit and still hadn’t been able to identify when passengers were all gone. I finally gave up and returned to the university, nervous and worried that my adviser, Professor Qiu, would criticize me. When I returned, I saw that Professor Wu had already settled in the school’s guesthouse and was talking with Professor Qiu. Professor Wu’s gray Chinese tunic suit and hat were obviously not new, nor was the briefcase in his hand. He was plain-looking and modest, completely different from what I had imagined. I entered the room with great nervousness, but he greeted me and said, “You must be my junior, Xiaoping Chen, right?” The tension suddenly disappeared. (He called me “junior” for decades until I was approaching 70.) I defended my graduation dissertation, and his amiable demeanor confirmed my first impression of Mengchao Wu. He asked critical questions and was happy when I gave him answers; he guided and inspired me when I could not answer immediately. He really wanted to help young people.

In the course of our subsequent contacts, we became more familiar with one another. Sometimes, I visited him in Shanghai and ate at his home. I liked to see his clear eyes. He chatted with me in plain language, often helping me resolve and clarify problems and confusion. When I visited, he always asked me the same question: “Xiaoping, how are you doing recently? What difficulties do you have?” The simple questions made me feel that my teacher cared about me. Although he was in Shanghai and I was in Wuhan, he still had a great influence on me in a subtle way. I owe my achievements today to his teachings and behaviors.

Academician Wu’s colleagues and patients called his hands the hands of God. He saved lives throughout his lifetime. In our conversations, he talked most about his patients’ illnesses, how they improved after receiving treatments, and what he learned in the process. He focused his mind on diagnosing diseases, but he set his heart on caring for people. Academician Wu always treated patients with utmost care and sincerity. In his 75 years of being a doctor, he was in charge of more than 16,000 operations and treated more than 20,000 patients. These numbers are living stories of Wu’s outstanding medical achievements as a doctor who saved lives and was committed to the well-being of humanity. For him, becoming a doctor was like the self-cultivation required to become an ascetic monk. There is no global shortage of experts and authority, but many lack the “human” quality – the willingness to give themselves to a greater cause. What Wu held dear to his heart was “carrying every patient across the river on his back.” He was the one who gave himself to the greater cause.

“Those who are not as virtuous as Buddha cannot be doctors, and those who are not as knowledgeable as sages cannot be doctors.” Professor Qiu’s words made us cautious and self-disciplined. Mengchao Wu followed his teacher’s lesson and became a true medical master just like his teacher: benevolent, righteous, and selfless. As his junior, what kind of mission do I inherit? What kind of responsibilities do I now bear? I often think about this, and the answer is self-evident.

May the legacy of Academician Mengchao Wu live on forever!

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