

## **My Father-like Professor Shi Zhengyi: The Pioneer of Chinese Ethnological Economics (Personal Story)**

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Professor Shi Zhengyi (1932-2015) was the same age as my father. In Chinese tradition, a teacher for a day is a father for life. Hence, I respectfully call Professor Shi my Father-like Professor. Born in Tongcheng County, Anhui Province, in 1932. Professor Shi graduated from the Master's Program in History of Economics of the Department of Economics of Renmin University of China in 1957. As a renowned Chinese ethnographer and economist, he has been engaged in theoretical research and teaching economics and ethnology for a long time. With meticulous scholarship and profound knowledge, he has studied Chinese and Western cultures with countless new ideas for research.

Moreover, he proposed and verified the scientific approach to theoretical thinking that goes from "representation to the abstract and the concrete." He initiated the establishment of the discipline of ethnological economics and the Institute of Ethnological Economics, pioneering the Marxist theory of ethnology specific to China. He was also the first to systematically verify the develop-the-west strategy, providing a theoretical basis for formulating national policies. He has been devoted to teaching for over 50 years, producing fruitful academic results. He has published eight monographs, edited 14 books, and published more than 120 papers. The Collected Works of Professor Shi, with more than 600,000 characters, represents the crystallization of his academic thoughts throughout his life. In his long-term academic activities and educational practices, Professor Shi developed a unique scientific approach to study known as the "rigorous, diligent, practical, creative and contextual" approach.

### **THE STORIES OF FATHER-LIKE PROFESSOR AND I**

Professor Shi's influence on my growth and development was no less than my father's. I met Professor Shi for the first time in the summer of 1983 when he chaired the China Minority Economic Research Conference in Ningxia. Having just graduated from university and working as a reporter for Ningxia TV, I went there to cover the event. Before that, I had conducted investigations and published articles on the economic development of ethnic minorities in the southern mountainous areas. Professor Shi had noticed and was impressed by these reports and articles. After the interview, he suggested that I apply to his graduate program, saying that he did not recruit any graduate students that year and planned to recruit new students in 1984. Then he asked me if I would like to join his program. I was willing to do so because I had considered attending graduate school long ago. Professor Shi told me, "I will give you a list of reference books." Upon his question about my English, I replied that I had no problem scoring high in English. In 1984, the admission score for English in the graduate school entrance exam was 30 points, and I scored 78 points, even higher than that of English students. That year, the university stipulated that graduate students who scored 70 points in the entrance examination in English could be excused from the English course.

Also, I scored high on the professional and essential tests, with the highest total score among all the candidates. In addition to my hard work, Professor Shi's guidance was instrumental in my good results. He said that he was a good judge who discovered my talent. I have always been indebted to Professor Shi.

I went back home for my family during the first winter vacation. One day, I met Mr. Yang, one of my friends, in a restaurant. Yang was the then chairman of the labor union of Yinchuan Blanket Factory, a state-run factory. I was invited to dine with him, where he told me about a backlog of 3,000 blankets in their factory and asked me if I could help him sell them. Also, he would give me a commission of 0.5 yuan per blanket. I accepted as I was familiar with a wholesaler. With my help, the deal went through smoothly. However, as the state-run factory could not settle my commission, we agreed that the wholesaler would pay my bill. However, the wholesaler later had financial problems and was sued in court for defaulting on payments to other suppliers. At that time, it was still the era of planned economy. The wholesaler, Zhang, was convicted of fraud for embezzling money from others. My commission of 1,500 yuan was discovered during the liquidation of the wholesaler's account. The company to which the wholesaler owed money did not recognize my commission as legitimate and requested me to return it. It should have been easily handled, as I just needed to refund the commission.

Nevertheless, they sent a letter to the university's disciplinary inspection committee, putting me in trouble. After that, the Party branch of the university held many meetings to criticize me for neglecting my proper duties as a student and engaging in speculative transactions. I was forced to write a self-criticism letter and admit I was wrong. However, I insisted that I had done nothing wrong because the factory had agreed to the commission. In the end, it was useless, no matter how I argued. The Party branch decided to take disciplinary action within the Party. All the board members except Professor Shi voted during the meeting to punish me, including my initially close classmates. Later, Professor Shi told me that he advised the discipline inspection committee that I did nothing wrong in this case and that no punishment was needed if I refunded the commission. However, the committee thought I should be punished because I did not study hard as a student but was involved in speculative transactions and received so much money at once (my mentor's salary then was less than 100 yuan a month). My mentor told me, "Unfortunately, I cannot stop the disciplinary action against you. However, as a Party member, I am authorized to disagree with the decision. You are talented, and this incident will have little effect on you. Anyone or any department will treat you rationally and factually, and they will not mistreat you because of this punishment. You are an excellent student in my eyes." It turned out that Professor Shi was right. When I graduated, the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee and the State Economic System Reform Commission, the key departments of the core leadership organs in China, did not reject me because of the disciplinary action after examining my file but accepted me. Given my expertise, I chose to join the State Economic System Reform Commission. However, my father blamed me for not discussing it with him earlier, as he thought I would have been better off in The United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee.

In the second semester of the first year of graduate school, the State Planning Commission, the Economic Daily News Agency and other institutions held a symposium on the western region's economic and social development strategy in Lanzhou. It issued a call for papers for the conference. Professor Shi contacted two of my classmates and me and asked us to write an essay for the conference. I was not yet well-versed in economic theory then, and writing an article that the conference could accept was a challenge. Professor Shi kept encouraging me, telling us a question he had been thinking about for a long time and then asking us to explain how we felt about it. He thought I had a good sense and thorough understanding, and then he made me the chief author. Under the mentor's guidance, we finished the article "On China's Multi-level and Wavelike Economic Structure and the Development of the Western Ethnic Regions." We submitted it to the Office for Proceedings of the Conference. To our surprise, our article was accepted and even won the Outstanding Article Award. These national conferences were of high standards then. Our article stood out among thousands of submissions, which delighted Professor Shi and us. He kept praising us, saying that it was the achievement that his students should have. It conforms to the Chinese saying that a good leader can bring a good team.

I remember in my second year of graduate school, the mentor would edit a book, "Economic Development of Ethnic Regions in Western China," and he assigned each of us to contribute a chapter to

the book. Later, he told me, "Since you are quick-witted, you may finish one more chapter. It may be unfair to other students, but it is my only solution." During the book's preparation, he noticed that foreign economic relations were not involved. Since I had been interested in the foreign economic trade of ethnic areas, he decided to add a chapter for me based on its original layout. This way, I added at least one more new achievement to my resume. At that time, it was extremely difficult for a graduate student or a professor to publish an article or contribute to a book manuscript. Hence, I highly appreciated the opportunity from Professor Shi.

I had to prepare my graduation thesis in the third year of graduate school. I chose the topic "Opening Up and Economic Development of Ethnic Regions in Western China." In my thesis, I cited a popular concept at that time, the Matthew effect on China's economic and social development. Through this concept, I described the widening economic and social development gap between the Western ethnic regions and the developed regions in the East. The phenomenon was not conducive to China's economic development and must be highly emphasized and suppressed. Professor Shi disagreed with my presentation and suggested that I change it. However, I did not think there was any problem with such a presentation because it was based on facts. I refused his advice for the first time. Later, to persuade Professor Shi of my presentation, I contacted Professor Shi's acquaintances (Professor Ji Chongwei, the executive officer of the Research Center for Economic, Technological and Social Development of the State Council, Dr. Cao Yuanzheng of the Department of Economics of the Renmin University of China, and Researcher Bai Nanfeng of the Institute of Economic System Reform). I wanted them to write to Professor Shi separately, agreeing with my statement on the widening gap using the Matthew Effect. In the final defense, Professor Shi deliberately sidestepped my defense. Otherwise, I would have failed. In his way, he protected me and preserved his dignity. In this regard, I have been so grateful to him.

After the thesis defense, I planned to compile the theses of my class of master's students in ethnological economics and publish them in Current Affairs Press under the title of "Choice and Development: Thoughts on the Economic Development of Ethnic Regions in Western China." As mentioned above, we could not easily publish a paper or a book in those days. Such an opportunity was undoubtedly very precious for fresh postgraduates like us. Unfortunately, two of my classmates' theses were not selected for publication because their subject matter did not fit well with this book. Coincidentally, these two students had personal conflicts with me. One of them had yelled at me to behave myself at a Party branch meeting about my selling blankets as an agent. I thought, "My God, I just sold 3,000 blankets to the factory as an agent," and "The chairman of the labor union appreciated it, so how can it be considered dishonest?" The other classmate disliked my personality. Professor Shi told me I should have been magnanimous and not mistreated them. I argued that their theses are irrelevant to the subject of our book as one is on the business history of a particular ethnic group, and the other is on the legislation of the ethnic region. If I were more broad-minded, Professor Shi said that putting their theses together in the book would be a mere technical matter. He taught me to be open-minded and tolerant. My teacher's severe criticism and charitable instructions made me feel insignificant. At this moment, I would like to apologize to my teacher for not being open-minded and letting him down.

Professor Shi devoted a lot to fostering and caring for me. During my graduate studies, I went through what often happened to young students. Professor Shi soothed and supported me like a father, encouraging me to withstand setbacks and pressures and to strive to move forward. Later, I started my studies in Canada, and my son was born in the summer of 1992. I shared the happy news with my parents and my mentor, and he sent me baby clothes from afar to congratulate me on becoming a father. Professor Shi is more than a mentor and a loving father to me. At this moment, I wish I could hear Professor Shi's instructions again.

## **FATHER-LIKE PROFESSOR'S DEDICATION TO THEORETICAL THINKING APPROACHES**

Professor Shi was born in the birthplace of the famous Tongcheng School, where the local people respected teachers and valued education in a culturally vibrant environment. Since childhood, he was gifted and well-versed in Confucian classics and poetry and was loved by his grandfather. When he was five, his mother died, and his father left the country to support the family. His bitter childhood left indelible scars in

his life. Because of this, he grew up with a sense of concern for the nation and compassion for the people. He felt he did not want others to suffer because he had suffered too much as a child.

In 1944, he enrolled in Fushan Middle School, where he studied under the tutelage of a famous local scholar. Due to his talent and painstaking efforts, he consistently ranked top in his studies. Influenced by revolutionary ideas, he joined the People's Liberation Army in 1948 and engaged in the battle for the liberation of Yunnan. To meet the needs of China's planned construction, he was approved to study economics at Renmin University of China in 1954. He was selected to pursue a master's degree in the history of economic theories under the supervision of Prof. Karataev, an expert from the former Soviet Union, due to his diligence and talent. In 1958, he voluntarily applied for a transfer to the Central Institute of Nationalities.

Being from a poor background, Professor Shi cherished the opportunity to study and work. He studied hard and examined carefully. He used to claim that "there is no room for falsehood in learning, and learning is achieved by doing, by delving, not by bragging!" It was his lifelong conviction. In the 1950s, he began to work on Marx's *Das Kapital*. It took him one and a half years to review the first volume alone, and he made 5,000 cards and 21 volumes of reading notes. He spent 20 years writing the article "Approaches to Theoretical Thinking," which was revised in seven drafts. After 50 years of intensive efforts, he gained a profound understanding of Marxist theory and produced a book entitled "Theoretical Thinking and Economic Science." In the book, he presented many original insights. In his opinion, the traditional view is one-sided and wrong to attribute the approach of theoretical thinking that goes from the abstract to the concrete in Marx's *Das Kapital*.

For this reason, he explicitly formulated and systematized Marx's approach to theoretical thinking as applied in the Critique of Political Economy and *Das Kapital* as the scientific approach that goes from "representation to the abstract and the concrete." Moreover, he demonstrated the universal value of this approach. By applying the results of his research on the scientific method to theoretical thinking in his research and teaching activities, he laid a solid foundation for creating ethnological economics and generalized ethnology.

## **FATHER-LIKE PROFESSOR'S COURAGE TO PIONEER AND ESTABLISH THE ETHNOLOGICAL ECONOMICS**

When Professor Shi first joined the Central Institute of Nationalities in the 1950s, he took part in the historical surveys on the social history of ethnic minorities and the compilation of three series of books on ethnic issues (later changed to five series of books). In the late 1970s, he started the cross-over research between ethnology and economics, exploring the construction of a new discipline. At a symposium held in September 1979 on the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the Central Institute of Nationalities, he presented "Some Opinions on the Creation of a New Discipline of Ethnological Economics." He first proposed the idea of establishing a new discipline of ethnological economics. At the same time, he pointed out that ethnological economics examines economic issues from the ethnological perspective and studies the ethnological issues from the economic perspective. The scope of ethnological economics can be divided into general and narrow aspects. In the broad sense, it deals with the economic issues of all ethnic groups in the world, and in the narrow sense, it deals with the economic issues of ethnic minorities in China. In 1982, he wrote an article again to make a systematic argument for ethnological economics. In 1987, he published a monograph systematically presenting the idea of establishing the discipline of ethnological economics. He indicated that ethnological economics is the study of the economic issues of various ethnic groups, the study of the economic issues from the perspective of ethnic groups, and the study of the ethnological problems from the economic angle.

To establish and develop the new discipline, Professor Shi spared no effort, visited many persons and institutions and wrote many books. He described and analyzed the concept and theoretical basis of ethnological economics, its research object and methodology, its characteristics, scope and relationship with other disciplines of ethnology, and its tasks and research areas. All these research results help to enrich the construction of ethnological disciplines, promote the economic development of ethnic groups and social

prosperity of ethnic regions, strengthen ethnic unity and secure social stability.

Over the past twenty years, ethnological economics has flourished as a new comprehensive and marginal inter-discipline and formed its independent and complete disciplinary system. Furthermore, the State has categorized ethnological economics as a first-level discipline in the economics category. Its theoretical achievements and practices have gained wide attention from scholars and authorities. Regarding the main accomplishments, first of all, some innovative theories have been introduced. Specifically, it was the first to define the scope of ethnological economics scientifically and explicitly proposed the creation of ethnological economics as a new discipline. It first brought up the issue of gaps in the economic development of ethnic areas and conducted a systematic and in-depth investigation and analysis in this regard. In response to the gaps, it first suggested the need to implement the “strategic policy of accelerated development” and systematically explained the importance of this policy and its various measures.

At the same time, it initially raised the issue of economic development in the western ethnic regions. It made exploratory arguments on how and when to develop the regions comprehensively and when they would become the focus of national development. It also analyzed and researched the population and talents of the western ethnic areas at an early stage. It was also the first to put forward the theories of wavelike development and the two-way grand cycle. Investigations were also conducted on border opening and trade, the ecological environment, township enterprises and market cultivation in ethnic areas. At the same time, scholars have also conducted thematic studies on different economic zones and economic development zones in some small watersheds in various ethnic provinces and regions. These economic zones include Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Ningxia, the Tibetan Plateau Economic Circle, the Beibu Gulf Economic Circle, and the Northeast Asian Economic Circle. Dozens of influential academic monographs were published, and hundreds of persuasive academic papers were published. Most of these theoretical results have been verified in practice and have been or are being recognized by scholars and authorities.

The ethnological economics founded by Professor Shi has opened up a new research field and broadened people’s horizons. It is different from the economics of ethnic minorities or the economics of ethnic minority regions, and it also varies from western economic anthropology and development economics. Based on the needs of China’s national development and the nation’s actual situation, ethnological economics is guided by scientific theories and approaches. It creates a unique path for development specific to China’s national conditions.

## **FATHER-LIKE PROFESSOR’S AFFECTION AND STRATEGY FOR DEVELOPING WEST CHINA**

“China is so poor that we need to address the basic needs of everybody in economic development.” “I was raised in a low-income family. When I acquired something as I grew up, I wanted to help others so they would not suffer anymore.” In his early years, Professor Shi joined the battle for the liberation of Yunnan, witnessing the poverty and misery of the people of the ethnic minority areas. He vowed to dedicate his life to the motherland and the minority people, honored his promise with his actions and devoted his life’s work to developing minority regions. Professor Shi was thoroughly committed to the research on economic issues of ethnic minority regions and the training of economic professionals for ethnic minorities. Also, he made many insightful comments on the economic development of Western China.

In 1988, Professor Shi began to investigate the development of Western China, which is one of his remarkable scientific achievements. In his book “Economic Development of Ethnic Regions in Western China,” he analyzed and justified in detail the concepts, characteristics, strategic approaches and various bases for realizing the strategic objectives of the ethnic regions in Western China. From the perspective of an economist and ethnologist, he provided policy ideas and a decision-making basis for implementing the develop-the-west strategy by the central government in the late 1990s. The develop-the-west approach has contributed to the prosperity of the whole western region. It has brought about a qualitative leap in the living conditions of the people in ethnic minority areas. It is attributed to the extraordinary and keen theoretical vision of an ethnological economist concerned about the motherland and attached to Western China.

With meticulous scholarship and a profound academic foundation, Professor Shi's research covers almost all fields of ethnology and economics. In addition to the above three significant theoretical achievements, he classified ethnology into narrow and generalized. In 1993, the book "Generalized Ethnology," edited by Professor Shi and contributed by dozens of experts, was officially published. The book caused a social sensation upon its release. In the preface, he wrote: "The narrow ethnology is also the traditional ethnology, which mainly investigates the clan system of the existing primitive peoples or the pre-capitalist cultural forms of the backward clans. The generalized ethnology refers to the ethnology with solid Chinese characteristics that Chinese ethnologists are developing under the guidance of the Marxist theoretical approach, i.e., the Marxist ethnology for China." The introduction of generalized ethnology is of great practical significance in enhancing the study of ethnicity and ethnic issues from both disciplinary and theoretical perspectives.

In addition, Professor Shi masterly studied the history of Chinese and foreign economic thoughts. In 2000, he began to write a book on economics for the general public, turning economists' profound theories into what is accessible to the general public in the form of easy-to-understand mini-biographies. In 2003, two books he edited (Chinese Economic Thinkers of All Ages: Biographies of One Hundred Figures and Foreign Economic Thinkers of All Ages: Biographies of One Hundred Figures) were published successively. The third book, "Contemporary Famous Economists in China - Biographies of One Hundred Figures," was also published as scheduled. Despite his old age, Professor Shi kept on writing, and he dedicated a valuable book for the public to popularize economics with his profound knowledge of the history of economics.

So far, Professor Shi published eight monographs, edited 14 books, and published more than 120 academic papers. His representative works include Marx's Economic Doctrine, Theoretical Thinking and Economic Science, Ethnological Economics and Four Modernizations in Ethnic Areas, Introduction to Ethnological Economics, Research on Ethnographic Science and Ethnographic Issues, History of Western Ethnology, and Generalized Ethnology (ed.). 2001 China Social Sciences Press published The Collected Works of Shi Zhengyi with over 600,000 characters. It contains the best works of his academic research and is an intellectual masterpiece with high theoretical sophistication, great academic value, and substantial practical significance.

## **FATHER-LIKE PROFESSOR'S COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION CONCEPT**

Professor Shi was a strict teacher in disciplining himself and educating his students. He made an unwritten family rule that he would not receive guests who came to his door with gifts, even if they were his students. He never received anything from his students in return for his decades of teaching. He was widely known for his "strictness" towards his students. He often told his students, "It is hard to be my student. I will not make you move in my arms or with my hands, but I will drive you ahead." On the first day of class for doctoral students, he issued a list of required books, a catalog of nearly a hundred books with millions of characters. He demanded that students write the best articles and be first-class talents.

He was also known for his love and care for his students, encouraging and guiding them and being willing to do favors for them. He would instead give up his interests for some research projects he could have done independently to allow his students to realize their talents. He would assign research projects to his students, teach them how to write and publish books, and even help them find jobs.

Years of teaching practice have enabled Professor Shi to develop his approach to nurturing talent, as summarized in competency-based and demand-driven education. Firstly, teachers need to know their students well. Secondly, they should combine competency-based and demand-driven education in a dialectical way. Teachers cannot just give lessons without educating or finish the lectures without considering the students' prospects and future career development. Teachers, on the other hand, need to be responsible for their students and their entire lives. Thirdly, teachers should be aware that graduate school is both the end of a person's study and the beginning of their future career.

Teachers should carefully design the program's courses, instruct them based on their specific characteristics and practical needs, and cultivate innovative decision-making capabilities. Fourthly, teachers should not separate classes, reading, investigation and dissertation writing in practical teaching. Instead,

they should ask each student to draw up their study plans following the unified training program, depending on the situation of different students. The core question is about the topic of the dissertation. Fifthly, teachers should emphasize the outline of the dissertation throughout the whole teaching process. Teachers should present the dissertation requirements and the teaching plan from the first semester's class. Teachers should pass on their knowledge and teach how they behave. As Professor Shi always put it, "To be a scholar, the first thing is to behave ourselves; the first thing to impart knowledge is to teach how to act; to be a scholar is less difficult than to behave ourselves; to impart knowledge is less difficult than to cultivate a virtuous person."

As an old Chinese saying goes, "A strict teacher produces outstanding students." Professor Shi has cultivated numerous talented persons in ethnic minority areas for over 50 years. His students are actively involved in various fields. Among the more than 40 PhDs he taught, some now hold key positions in the central state organs and the military system (e.g., Lin Chengdong, director of the Theory Bureau of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army). Some are already well-known scholars (e.g., Wang Tianjin, professor of the School of Economics of the Minzu University of China, and Zhang Lijun, dean of the school). Some have become leading cadres in ethnic minority areas (e.g., Wang Zhengwei, former Chairman of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, and Cao Zhenghai, former Secretary of the CPC Committee of the Hulun Buir League). Three of Professor Shi's doctoral students in Western China served as university presidents, and three became provincial leaders. Many of his students have also taken up key leading positions at the prefecture and municipal levels. Dozens of doctoral and master's students educated by him in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region have become elites in the local political, business and academic circles. Two of them became leaders of the autonomous region. The dissertations of each of his doctoral students were published as books. Many of them are valuable works in economics (e.g., Shan Chun's *Economic Research on Overseas Chinese*, Wu Shimin's *Theory of Circled City Economy--Circled City Economy in Beijing*, and Luo Li's *Temple Economy -- The Economy of Taoist Temples, Mosques and Churches*).

In China's academic circles, my father-like professor is undoubtedly an economist and ethnologist with a strong personality. He takes a clear-cut stand and is dynamic and prolific. He can integrate practical knowledge into practice, with a broad mind in academic studies and creativity. Despite his fruitful academic achievements, he is indifferent to fame and fortune, and he has always been dedicated to his work with a calm mind and profound knowledge. He regards scholarly research, moral character and conduct as the foundation of his life. Moreover, he adheres to the principles of never telling lies or doing anything wrong but serving the people all his life. He stands out as a model for teachers and scholars.