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The reluctant hero of Shaanxi

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MA PingYi thrives on work. He holds many positions in society, politics, business and welfare work. He is the People's Representative for Shaanxi Province at Beijing and the People's Representative in Xian city.

On meeting him for the first time, one would never believe that he is a person of high position because of his humility. He is approachable to anyone who wishes to see him.

Ma admires two people outside of China. The first is Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the champion in the political arena and the other, Muhammad Ali, the champion in the sports arena. To him, both fight for justice in style.

Ma draws his inspiration from people he admires and he believes success comes only from sincere efforts. This is reflected in his rags-to-riches lifestyle, which taught him to always give his best shot. The rest, he leaves to the Will of the Almighty. He says he is only human after all.

Ma was forced to stop school at the tender age of 14 to earn a living when the Cultural Revolution started. During that time, a lot of jobs were left vacant by the young revolutionaries caught up in the frenzy. These stop-gap jobs were taken up by young boys like him. He was hardworking and he learned as much as he possibly could from the 72 different jobs he had during the whole period of the Cultural Revolution.

When the scenario changed, Ma had acquired enough entrepreneurial skills to start a basic manufacturing business. He managed to gather a few friends to take over a waste dump and set up a factory to manufacture electrical items. Though he did not gain much monetarily, he gained a lot of experience from that venture.

Ma's greatest desire was to make any projects he undertook succeed and he was always looking for opportunities not just for the sake of wealth, but to produce goods needed by the people.

The break came whilst he was helping his friend carry water up to his highrise apartment one winter.

The existing pump, which did not have enough pressure, caused great hardship. So Ma undertook the task of finding a solution.

His company invented a pump that was not only efficient but was also economical. It is now widely used all over China under the brand name of "Chon Ma" (Brilliant Horse). "Chon Ma" won the first prize for the most outstanding invention in 1985. It is approved by the government and is now a standard requirement for highrise apartments.

In another instance, he read of the sufferings of soldiers stationed in the mountainous areas west of Shaanxi. The soldiers suffered hardship from travelling 32.2km to transport water. Ma solved the problem by designing a portable pump together with a conveyor system.

Through his successful ventures, Ma has amassed a great deal of wealth.

But he still leads a simple life and moves freely without the protection of bodyguards.

Ma's generosity in the education sector is well known. He sets up funds for poor students contributes towards building kindergartens and primary schools.

Ma, who never had the opportunity to further his education, knows the importance of education to children.

One of his pet projects is to redevelop the Xian city centre where the Muslims have been living for 1,000 years.

The city is quaint and is famous for their food. The people are proud that the late Premier Chou En Lai never failed to dine there whenever he went to Xian.

In order to preserve the people's way of life, Ma has managed to halt the government's plan to build a major road through the area and used his influence to persuade the government to allow him to redevelop the area into a major shopping complex and apartments to house the residents. Ma feels that relocating them will be a tragedy since the lives of the Muslims revolve around the Xian Grand Mosque, one of the most beautiful in the world.

Ma has embarked on historical research on the Xian Muslims who lived after Empress Cuxi's reign of terror during the Ching Dynasty.

In the early 19th century, there were eight million Muslims but the population is now only 70,000! Where have they all gone?

His research has taken him to the heart of Russia through Kazakstan, Krygistan and Uzbekistan, following the plight of the 2,000 Xian Muslims who under General Pai Fan Yu, fought the Manchus right to the border and from there, escaped to a village which became their home. They call this forced migration "Hijra". The people of this village, with a population of 5,000, are called the Dungans.

When Ma finally encountered the Dungans, it was like meeting a long lost family." It was a highly charged emotional encounter which was recorded and documented in a video tape. The Dungans' way of life is exactly as it was 130 years ago. It is an enigma - the language, dressing, the food and customs have all frozen in a time warp. Even the poems they recite has been long forgotten except for the esoteric scholars who remember them vaguely. It is believed that many researchers and scholars are heading that way to uncover one of the great findings of the time.

Ma is now keen to develop cultural exchanges with people from other countries and to this end, he has met with visitors from Malaysia and the United States. In the pipeline is a plan to exhibit Xian Muslims' artifacts at the Omar AlKhattab Mosque in Los Angeles, which came about after the visit of Mahmoud Dakhil, the president of the mosque.

It is an excellent start to introduce the Xian Muslims to the world. In the meantime, he is polishing up his English which at the moment is confined to only "Thank you" and "How are you?"

Ma is still young at 46. He has two children.

Here's an excerpt from the book "Representatives from the Revolutionary Changes Period" - subtitled The Muslims' Proud Son, published by the Shaanxi People's Publishers:

"Ma PingYi is a handsome man, with well-defined features on a strong and intelligent face. He is well built and has a strong physique. One is immediately struck by the imposing presence of the man. His bright inquiring eyes and attentive manner are very captivating.

"Brought up in a traditional Muslim home, imbued with Islamic values, he's helpful, considerate and caring.

"These characteristics are a great asset not only to the community but also to the nation. Coupled with perception, farsightedness and an inborn sense of management, he is loved by all who comes into contact with him."

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