

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES  
BY SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA  
MRS. ELSIE TU, CHAMPION OF THE COMMON PEOPLE**

There is a “bodhisattva” living in Hong Kong. And she is an eighty-five-year-old English-woman. “I’ve lived in Hong Kong nearly fifty years,” she says, “and I have never thought of leaving. My only thought all along has been to be of service to the Chinese people living here.” Her simple, unpretentious way of talking reveals her character. She has the tenacity of a person who has decided to live out the remainder of her life in a foreign land.

We first met at the Urban Council Public Library in Hong Kong in January 1974. Mrs. Tu was then an Urban Councilor and, as the council’s representative, she expressed great joy at the Soka Gakkai’s gift of 4,500 books to the library. She was dignified and warm; behind her glasses, her blue eyes shone with kindness. I couldn’t believe that such an elegant and refined woman was the famous heroine-councilor who had stood up to Hong Kong’s criminal gangs and corrupt police force.

Anyone would be astonished at what she has accomplished. Bribery and corruption used to be rampant in Hong Kong. Open-air stalls, for example, were not allowed to operate unless they paid off the mob, and a portion of their “protection money” was then funneled to the police. With the help of a friend, Mrs. Tu photographed a gangster receiving payment as the police stood by watching, and had it published in the papers.

The people of Hong Kong enthusiastically applauded her actions. But her friends were shocked at how she had risked her life. They cautioned her, and told her that if she had not been a foreigner, she would already be dead.

Mrs. Tu did not get off completely unscathed, for her enemies hatched a plot to ruin her reputation. In the 1960s, during a period of unrest in Hong Kong, she was accused of having instigated antigovernment demonstrations. In fact, just the opposite was the case: she had tried to persuade a group of young people to cool down.

Some in Hong Kong call her a “strange foreigner” because she cares more for the Chinese than they do themselves.

Mrs. Tu was born in a coal-mining town in northern England in 1913. Her father was a tramcar conductor, and he earned just enough for the family to get by. They lived near the poor part of town, but her father was abundantly rich in spirit. He once told his daughter that it had been a stroke of luck that she had been born in a relatively affluent place like England, and that she could enjoy a life free of starvation and receive an education. She should be grateful for her good fortune, he stressed, and he told her that she should do something to help the poor and suffering in other lands. She should never look down upon the poor, he said; respect everyone equally. He urged her to be the ally of those in need, and to think of a way to serve them.

Her father had become an orphan at 11, at which time he was forced to quit school and start working. But Mrs. Tu says that he knew better than any scholar what was important in life.

Her strong desire to help others led her to a fervid practice of Christianity in college. After graduating from college, Mrs. Tu became an elementary and middle school teacher. When she was 35, she went to mainland China as a missionary with her first husband. A year or two after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, she moved to Hong Kong. Gradually she began to redirect her efforts from missionary work to education and

social service.

The first thing she did upon arriving in Hong Kong was to set up a tent among the wooden huts in the slums, where she began to teach some thirty children. It hardly qualified as a school. She used her earnings from teaching at other schools to take care of her students in the tent school—which today is the famous Mu Kuang English School, with 1,400 students. Though Mrs. Tu is the school's supervisor, she continues to teach. Education, she says, is not some rarefied art. It is simply engaging children with gentleness and kindness, and motivating them so that they will have an interest in learning for themselves.

She doesn't believe in telling children what not to do; it only makes them want to do it, she has found—including smoking and using drugs. The important thing is to have a positive attitude when talking to children to give them hope and motivation. What she worries about most is whether children today have that sense of hope. She is deeply concerned about the decline in adults' sense of morality and the influence of the consumer culture, which is why she has such great hopes for the SGI's activities.

I invited her to Japan in the autumn of that year we first met (in 1974). I recall fondly our discussions about her concern for young people. She visited Soka University and the Soka Junior and Senior High Schools during her stay.

She is a humble woman, so she did not speak of her hardships, but it is easy to imagine the difficulties she must have had to surmount over the years as an advocate for the people. Day after day she walked the crowded back alleys of Hong Kong's slums, listening to what the poor had to tell her. She wanted nothing for herself, she feared nothing; her only desire was to see smiles on these people's faces.

"Mr. Ikeda," she told me in December 1983, when she kindly came to attend the Hong Kong SGI Culture Festival, "the busier I am, the healthier I seem to be." I told her I knew what she meant, and it was no doubt because her actions were based on her strong sense of mission. "That's probably true," she replied. "When you don't have anything to do, that's when you fall ill. It's good to be busy as long as you are of use to others." she said with a smile.

When she cut the ribbon with me at the opening of the World Boys and Girls Art Exhibition in Hong Kong some seven years later, in February 1991, her eyes were just as bright and sparkling as ever. She showed no signs of aging. Viewing the pure-hearted and wonderfully expressive pictures of the children, she remarked to me that only adults go to war. There is no war in the hearts of children. The pictures made her ask herself, what legacy we could leave this new generation of children.

Mrs. Tu's father was exposed to poison gas during World War I. Since childhood, her belief in peace has been strong. She has no children of her own, but says that all her pupils are her children. And those children are spread all over Hong Kong—all over the globe. One day a young man gave her his seat on the subway and said, "Mrs. Tu, I was one of your pupils." Those are the happiest moments of all, she says.

Children notice everything. The people notice everything. It may seem easy to fool the people, but in the long run, it is impossible to deceive those living honest, decent lives. Those are the very people who praise Mrs. Tu as "Hong Kong's conscience" and "the mother of Hong Kong civil rights."

Mrs. Tu herself says that she would far rather be known as a person who helped others than as a great or important person. And what a wonderful life she has led, too—a half-century of such service!

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Her life is a perfect example of the lesson she has taught her students for years: “If you wish to find happiness, do good. Life is a one-way street with no turning back. Therefore, if there is something you can do for others, step forward and volunteer. If you put off that opportunity, you are letting your own chance for happiness slip away from you.” □

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