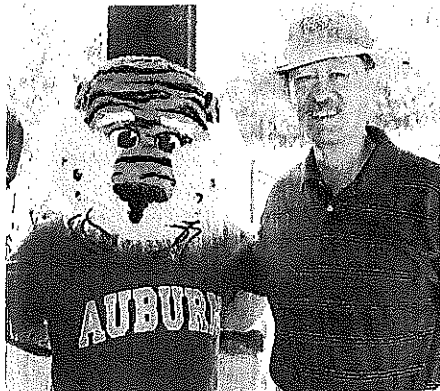


Leaving Taiwan

ER TRUITT



論理

Fate directed the journey of Jin-Dih Shih from Taiwan to Auburn University in 1966. The son of a Chinese Air Force officer, Shih was familiar with the university due to his father's time at Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. Shih obtained his undergraduate degree in Taiwan, but economic and political conditions were unfavorable to advanced degrees.

"I went to U.S. Information Services, which is a place for cultural exchange of information. In looking at a list of universities, Auburn was at the top due to alphabetical listing. Because I had heard of Auburn, I decided to go there, especially when I learned of a graduate teaching position," said Shih, adding he did not Americanize his name upon arrival because he always thought he would return to his homeland.

Growing up in Taiwan, Shih explains that students were taught information by their instructors.

"You don't learn to think for yourself in Taiwan. My first class at Auburn, the professor walked in, put four lines on the blackboard and dismissed class. I was like, 'Where are the notes? Where are the books?' I had come to Auburn to learn," Shih said. "The professor said, 'Just think.' It completely changed the way my mind worked. I learned to think logically. It changed my life."

After obtaining his master's degree in mathematics in 1968, Shih taught in Talladega, Alabama, having brought over his wife, Wendy, from Taiwan.

"She always knew she would be an American so she got an American name," laughed Shih.

The economic climate was not conducive for employment in Taiwan so Shih remained in America.

"Back in the mid-'70s, it was easier to obtain an immigration visa if you had a higher education degree. If

I went back home, I might have to return as a refugee. Plus, it was so easy to work here. Americans just don't realize the wonderful opportunities this country provides."

Providing for his growing family prompted Shih to take the first exam for the actuarial program in the insurance industry. He passed with flying colors and soon employers began calling.

"Someone asked me what I thought about becoming an actuary. I said, 'Does it associate to mortuary?' I had never heard of actuary. But the insurance companies needed someone with logical thinking and mathematical analysis skills. I was one of the few in the industry with a math degree at the time," Shih said.

Shih references an old Chinese proverb to describe his early years in the insurance industry – *When there's no tiger on the mountain, the monkey is the king*. He says he was very lucky to get into the field early. Fate carried him west to California, over 10 years after he first stepped off the plane in America. The couple spent the next two decades raising a son and daughter while Shih gathered information and projected outcomes.

"You see, my job was to take lots of information, decipher it and then come to a logical conclusion. Luckily, I was right more times than I was wrong. I owe this way of thinking to that first class at Auburn University," Shih said.

Retired since 2005, Shih now analyzes his golf game at least three times a week just outside of Los Angeles, California. He also volunteers with elementary school children through the Actuarial Foundation Project where he inspires third- through fifth-graders to find fun in math.

"I put a problem on the board and tell them the sooner they figure it out, the sooner they can go to the playground. I try to teach them logic at this age because their mind is still pure. How can math be intimidating?" asked Shih, adding that Auburn is one of the few universities to foster this skill. "It's important for me to give back because of this reason."