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Roads well traveled

Myanmar driver-turned-tycoon cites honesty and integrity as keys to building business and international partnerships

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For the owner of a business of any size, integrity is key. This is the principle that has brought Aik Htun, one of the richest businessmen in Myanmar, through ups and downs.

"The biggest secret of success is honesty and integrity," said Htun, the chairman of conglomerate Shwe Taung Group, speaking in fluent Mandarin. His father came from Southwest China's Yunnan province.

"I was not born in a very rich family, and I had to quit school after Grade 7," said Htun. He was born in a small village in Myanmar's Shan State, which borders China to the north and is home to several ethnic groups including the Shan people, a Tai ethnic group of Southeast Asia.

Hoping to change his life, he left the village and went to Yangon by himself for a job. For three years, he served as a driver for a Myanmar businessman who was doing wholesale business in tea leaves. Using what he learned there, he later started his own business, developing it little by little.

"At that time (in the 1970s), only small businesses were allowed to operate," said Htun. Starting with a roadside stand selling agricultural products, he later opened a retail shop to sell biscuits and gradually moved into the wholesale business.

In March 1989, Myanmar introduced the State-owned Economic Enterprises Law, which essentially opened the door for the expansion of the private sector. In the 1990s, as the adoption of an open-door policy gradually enhanced Myanmar's links with the global market, Htun decided to make a foray into international trade. Shwe Taung Group was established around that time.

"As we grew, we noticed the huge potential in Myanmar's real estate sector," said Htun. "Back in 1990, nobody was doing real estate business in Yangon. There were only some old buildings scattered across the city and a lot of areas had been left undeveloped.

"The government would give a piece of land (to developers) for free, as long as you had the capability (to develop it well)," said Htun.

At that time, many people were still living in cluttered buildings with no lavatories. After receiving some land from the government, Shwe Taung Group built over 20 housing estates in Yangon, hoping to improve living standards for the people.

"When we visit those estates sometimes, we feel very happy to see how people there can now have a better life," said Htun, adding that those projects have given him some of his greatest fulfillment.

Another project especially meaningful to Htun is the Yeywa Hydropower Station. Located on the Myitnge River in the Mandalay region of central Myanmar, the project is the country's first roller-compacted concrete (RCC) dam, with installed capacity of 790 megawatts. It was a China-backed project and Shwe Taung Group was the dam's sole supplier of RCC.

"Before 2010 (when the hydropower station started operation), people in Myanmar, including those in Yangon, could only use electricity for about one hour per day," said Htun. "The project improved the level of electricity supply by some 80 to 90 percent and the cities were completely lit up.

"Through this project, we feel that we can make small contributions to the Myanmar people," he said, adding that many companies were not paying heed to the hydropower project because it required working in remote areas and profits could not be guaranteed.

Htun has bought back the car he drove for the wholesale merchant in Yangon and still keeps it in his house. He said the car reminds him of the tough days and how he started everything from scratch.

Today, Shwe Taung Group has a diverse business portfolio with a focus on core sectors including building materials, distribution, engineering and construction, infrastructure investment, lifestyle, and real estate.

Among its many landmark projects across the country are the Baluchaung No 3 Hydropower Plant, Hledan Junction flyover in Yangon, Myanmar's first modern shopping center Junction 8, and the 23-story Junction City Tower.

But Htun said the company's biggest achievement has been in fostering and training local talent. For example, he said that on the Hledan Junction flyover project, though international experts were invited for technical support, the main construction was done by local engineers, demonstrating the capability of Myanmar's engineering professionals.

The Junction City integrated project, which comprises a five-star hotel and a shopping mall as well as residences and offices in the future,

is completely constructed and now managed by local staff, according to Htun. "I feel very proud that we can pioneer in showing the world how a Myanmar company can also deliver projects that meet world-class standard," he said.

Overseeing the company's more than 7,000 employees, Htun said he is careful when expanding into new areas or taking on new projects.

"When I started out doing business, I was not quite clear about what to take into account when looking at entering a new sector," said Htun. "But once we had grown to a certain level, we began to think (first) about whether a project is beneficial to the country and its people, and then whether the project has the potential for future development."

Though he did not continue his studies, Htun said he likes to learn from others, whether companies or countries, through travel.

"For example, when I first visited Europe, I saw that many buildings were very old and timeworn. But when I walked into the hotels, (I was impressed by) the quality of many facilities and how well they were managed." Noting the importance of systematic management rules to safeguard high-quality projects, he soon passed this idea on to his entire company.

And for Htun, the idea of staying true to one's integrity has never changed.



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Bio

Aik Htun

Founder and chairman, Shwe Taung Group

Quick takes:

How do you stay healthy?

I like swimming. Even now I can swim continuously for several hours. As long as you grasp the right technique of swimming, you won't feel tired and you can swim for a long time.

Why did you establish the International Business Promotion Centre (IBPC) in 1998?

In 1998, Myanmar experienced the Asian financial crisis. But we noticed that some countries in West Asia, such as Bangladesh, were not very much affected. It is important to learn from others, so by forming IBPC, we can bring our members to different countries across the world. We not only showcase companies in Myanmar, but also invite foreign companies to invest in our country and find local partners. IBPC is a bridge to connect domestic and international businesspeople.

How are you helping Myanmar?

Our company has donated about 100 public schools, from elementary schools to universities. We hope we can help improve the overall education (in the country). Each year, we also select about 40 to 50 students in Myanmar and send them to study overseas, in China, European countries and the United States. We provide the tuition fees and cover travel expenses.

ment from all countries is welcomed in Myanmar as long as it can bring benefit to the local community.

"More and more entrepreneurs are coming to Myanmar, especially those from China," he said. "They can not only help with economic development, but also train their local recruits with new techniques and innovative ideas."

In November, Shwe Taung Group acted as the main sponsor of a 10-day Belt and Road art and cultural exchange journey of eight Chinese artists to Myanmar, organized by *China Daily*. The artists traveled around four major cities — Yangon, Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake — and a total of 32 finished works showing their impressions of Myanmar were exhibited on Nov 21 and 22 at Junction City.

"Through the paint brush of Chinese artists, I hope the scenic views of Myanmar and its culture can be introduced to the world," said Htun. "The more people know about Myanmar, the more people will come for travel and business."

"Trust cannot be built in one day — and I have held to this since I was just a driver. This is why, although there were many difficulties along the road, whenever we want to restart the journey, people will believe in you and support you," he said, adding that persistent integrity has not only helped him build the Shwe Taung business empire in Myanmar, it also allows him to form international partnerships.

The energy sector will continue to be a core area for the company, said Htun. Besides hydropower, he said Shwe Taung will gradually look into wind and solar power to satisfy the country's electricity demand in a sustainable way.

In addition, he said the company will work to improve Myanmar's infrastructure through further road, highway, rail and bridge projects.

Myanmar is actively involved in the China-led Belt and Road Initiative and was among the original 21 countries that signed the deal in October 2014 to set up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Htun said the BRI will not only accelerate the development of Myanmar but also provide opportunities for the private sector, as there will be many infrastructure projects planned for the future.

Besides investment from China, Htun, who is also the founder and chairman of the International Business Promotion Centre, said invest-