

Professor Ovid J. L. Tzeng – Biographical Sketch

Siu Lien Ling Wong Visiting Fellow 2012/2013, Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Professor Ovid J. L. Tzeng is Academician and Distinguished Research Fellow at Academia Sinica of Taiwan. He is a world-leading expert on psycholinguistics and cognitive neuroscience, an influential educator, and was a highly popular senior government official. Professor Tzeng went to the United States for doctoral study in 1969 and developed a distinguished career in teaching and research. Since his return to Taiwan in the 1990s, he has made immense contributions to the local development of psychology and cognitive science. He is an advocate for children reading and popular science education, and is described by the media as “the catcher of students’ hearts,” “a scientist good at telling stories,” “an old man with a youthful heart,” and “a wildly passionate university president.” He has also served in the government as the Minister of Education, Minister Without Portfolio, and Minister of the Council for Cultural Affairs.

Growing up as a gifted and creative child in Kaohsiung, Professor Tzeng attended the Department of Education at National Chengchi University in Taipei and began his pursuit in psychology when he entered the master program in educational psychology. He developed an interest in scientific experiments on the neuro-mechanisms of learning and memory processes. He went on to obtain a Ph.D. in cognitive psychology from The Pennsylvania State University in 1973 and started his professional career as a professor at the University of California, Riverside, in 1974. He soon launched a pathbreaking research project with Professor William Wang Shi Yuan, a renowned linguist, on how the brain functions in the reading of Chinese characters.

In the spring of 1978, Professor Chao Yuen-Ren, the Father of Chinese Linguistics, started attending Professor Tzeng’s class for a year, but Professor Chao did not reveal his identity until hosting a dinner at home for Professor Tzeng after the final lecture. Professor Chao faulted Chinese psychologists for overlooking the many interesting features of the Chinese language and following the mainstream focus on the English language. Professor Tzeng pledged to fill this void. Subsequently, he became a Visiting Associate Professor of Haskins Laboratories at Yale University, an influential center for contemporary linguistics research. The pioneering research of Professor Tzeng on the cognitive neuroscience of Chinese language has opened a whole new research frontier in mainstream academic research that has long focused on the cognitive neuroscience of English language.

Professor Tzeng has received numerous honours and awards. In 1994 he was elected as an academician of Academia Sinica, the first psychologist granted the honour since the academy was

moved to Taiwan. He was one of the 30 eminent cognitive psychologists around the world invited to be a member of the International Association for the Study of Attention and Performance, a leading organization on cognitive science research. He was elected as a fellow of the Academy of Sciences for the Developing World in 2010.

In 1990, Professor Tzeng was recruited by National Chung Cheng University to establish the Center for Cognitive Science and serve as the director. He was a masterful and charismatic teacher, talented in story-telling and contagious with his passion and dynamism. Not surprisingly, his lectures were extremely popular. When he moved to National Yang-Ming University in 1997, he was soon elected to be one of the most popular university presidents of all time in Taiwan.

His distinguished professional career in Taiwan spans a wide range of academic administrative positions and public offices: the Vice-President and President of National Yang-Ming University in 1997 and 1999, respectively; Minister of Education in 2000; Vice-President of Academia Sinica in 2002; Chancellor of the University System of Taiwan in 2006; Minister Without Portfolio overseeing educational and cultural affairs, and Minister of the Council for Cultural Affairs in 2008.

As the Minister of Education, Professor Tzeng's first policy initiative was to promote reading among children with a three-year reading campaign. The programs designed to mobilize both schools and families include the reading of 50 to 100 books every year among students of kindergartens and primary schools, publishing handbooks on reading, cultivating pilot teachers, producing bookmarks for sharing reading ideas, conducting talks on book recommendation, celebrating Children Reading Day, and creating passports of reading.

In addition to the promotion of reading, Professor Tzeng is highly dedicated to popularizing science education by writing books and columns, as well as delivering lectures. He co-hosted a popular science radio programme *Science for Everyone* and received a Broadcast Golden Bell Award for "Best Host of an Educational and Cultural Programme."

Professor Tzeng is a remarkably successful and enterprising scientist, educator, and public servant. His long and distinguished career is decorated with one after another exciting ventures. The productivity of his career reflects not only the power of a youthful heart but also the great synergy of a charismatic person, a pure conviction, a romantic and imaginative mind, and a society one loves.

This biographical sketch draws on some of the details and quotations from a feature story that appeared in the September 2000 issue of *Global Views Monthly* and Professor Tzeng's 2009 reading guide for Tina Seelig's book, *What I Wish I Knew When I Was 20: A Crash Course on Making Your Place in the World*.