

CHAPTER VII

REBUILDING COUNTRY ROADS

改修道路啓導農民

BEFORE the Sino-Japanese War broke out, I had already achieved some measure of success in Shanghai as an industrialist. I was, with my numerous manufacturing enterprises, always pressed for time, and as a result I could make only hurried visits to my native village near Wusih, a large city on the Shanghai-Nanking Railway.

In those days, I would travel by train from Shanghai and alight at Lo Sheh Village, then I would catch a motor launch of the Yang Shu Yuan Company, and disembark at the ferry pier at the God of Fortune Temple, a hamlet, not far from Hwa Chih Village, where my home was located.

But to get home after leaving the motor launch, I had to walk a narrow country trail, flanked by rice fields. During the summer months of June and July, water in the rice paddies on both sides of the tortuous track often rose to the level of the path.

Farmers, as they were wont, often encroached on the trail, digging into the bank of the path in order to gain a tiny bit more land for their farms. This eroded the already narrow trail still more, and often the path would cave in at one point or another.

The adventure of negotiating the foot path was difficult and perilous enough in daylight and in good weather, but at night or when it rained, this was a slippery, muddy and chancy exploit. One ran the risk of falling into the water-filled paddy fields at night in good or foul weather. And when it rained, the hardy traveller stood the chance of

being mired down. If one was trying to walk in the rain wearing shoes, one quickly lost his shoes and his balance in the slimy slush. In such circumstances, progress was virtually impossible.

The situation was about the same on trails leading east from the village to Kao Ming Bridge and north to Yeh Hong. These country trails had been in such a condition since time immemorial, and no one had ever had the initiative to do something to improve the paths.

At that time, I had already established a good foundation in my business career. Thus in line with my belief that one should do things equally beneficial to oneself as well as to others, I vowed to rebuild this trail.

That year my late mother was celebrating her 60th birthday. Cash gifts from friends and relatives came to *several thousand dollars, and with my mother's consent and blessing, the gift money which was to be used for feasts to celebrate the occasion was set aside for rebuilding the road. I also persuaded others in the village to help, and donations from others also came to a little over *\$1,000.

With this money, I began to build a paved road from my village at Hwa Chih southward to the God of Fortune Temple ferry point. This was the first stage, and after this was finished, I started to build a new path eastward to Kao Ming Bridge, northeastward to Yeh Hong Village, and northward to Sun Kong Village.

When the money ran out, I donated to the road project all my salary and my bonus which I received as nominal manager of a restaurant in Shanghai, Tai Hung Yung Lou (which I had helped some friends to establish in Shanghai). I also enlisted the help of a distant uncle, Mr Ting Shao-chu, to oversee the construction work.

We ordered bricks direct from the local kiln. Several local volunteers, fired by the enthusiasm for having a better country road, also joined in the work. So before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, our new road network was

*The value of the dollar then was about \$110 an ounce of gold.

completed.

The method I adopted in building the road was rather unique. First I had the banks of the original path strengthened with fill. Then bricks were laid in an inverted "V" pattern, with one "V" or two "V's", depending to the width of the path. This not only provided a solid and even road surface, but it also insured that farmers would not, henceforth, dig into the road to gain planting areas.

At the same time, I had a survey made of the road. Each kilometer was divided into 20 equal sections, each the distance of 50 meters. At every one of these 50-meter points, I had a yellow stone slab, measuring about five feet long and two feet wide, paved in the road to serve as markers. When you walked past 20 yellow stone markers, you had walked a kilometer or 10 markers to a Chinese "li".

This system helped to give the country folk some means of judging distance correctly. In a way this was of some educational value to the people in the villages, which perhaps was even more meaningful than re-building the road itself.

Hitherto, the country folk judged distances haphazardly. They usually had a vague idea of the distance between villages. No one had ever undertaken a survey, and neither had anyone made a serious study of the subject. When they said that the distance between two villages was so many "li", it usually meant that they had heard it by hearsay — the word-of-mouth guess-work handed down from generation to generation. Usually when you were told that the distance between two points was five "li" or ten "li", the discrepancy in actual distance could be considerable.

I remember that when I first started to build the road from my village, Hwa Chih, to Kao Ming Bridge, I asked several village elders to tell me what the distance was between these two points. Some said it was one "li", others said it was one and one-half "li". But none was sure. Nor could they really tell me how far a "li" actually was. After I had finished building the Hwa Chi — Kao Ming Bridge road, I found, as a result of a survey, that the distance was 1.5 kilometers or

about three Chinese "li". This showed that the earlier information given to me by the village elders was completely misleading.

With the road built, the people in the villages began to have a correct idea of distance. In time, it helped them also to learn some simple mathematics. Without seeming so, the country path I built had led them to a new world of simple but basic scientific facts.

Although these several roads were not more than three to four kilometers long, they were of great benefit to local transportation when completed. This accomplishment could be considered a small contribution on my part to my native birthplace.

After the Chinese Communists occupied the Mainland, the several roads which I built in the area of Wusih were still being used until the "Great Leap Forward" and the attendant "backyard furnace" movement. At that time, it was heard that a portion of the bricks used in the building of the roads were dug up and subsequently used in constructing backyard furnaces. However, the precise details were not obtainable nor known. If the roads were thus broken up, then from the point of view of the one who built them, it is certainly a regrettable incident.