

# Shining brightly

Thanks to the University's IMBA program, Wei Chen finds business success with Sunshine Enterprise.

Thousands of miles, multiple time zones and a language barrier separate Memphis from China, but the seemingly disparate cultures of the Mid-South and the Far East are united by a supply chain that spans the divide while fueling the global economy.

And University of Memphis graduate Wei Chen represents one of the connecting links.

A native of China, Chen earned his International Master's of Business Administration (IMBA) from the U of M in 1998. After graduating, he stayed in Memphis and formed a company called Sunshine Enterprise Inc., a multifaceted, multinational and multimillion-dollar business that taps into strengths of his first home and his adopted home — and aims to help both nations prosper.

"I formed Sunshine Enterprise as I saw there are many opportunities conducting businesses between the U.S. and China," says Chen, 36. "There are many differences between the two giant countries, like language, culture, cost, etc. Our mission is to bridge the differences between the two countries."

Most importantly, Chen hasn't forgotten the university that helped him forge that mission.

## Land of opportunity

Born and raised in Changsha, the capital city of mainland China's Hunan Province, Chen came to the U.S. in 1996 to attend graduate school. With his eye on a degree in international business, Chen zeroed in on the U of M because of its valuable internship program and scholarship funds made available to him.

"For a foreign student, an opportunity to work as an intern in a big U.S. corporation is huge," Chen says. "It offers firsthand experience to learn U.S. corporate culture, which is not available

in the classroom. Also, a scholarship without paying the tuition helps foreign students like me tremendously."

Chen didn't have much money when he came to Memphis, so being able to concentrate on his studies without worrying about the cost of school was indispensable. Mindful of the opportunity the U of M afforded him, Chen immersed himself in his schoolwork and his internship.

His determination and drive caught the eye of Dr. Robert Taylor, associate professor and chair of the Department of Management in the U of M's Fogelman College of Business & Economics. Taylor, who taught Chen in organizational behavior and human resource management, quickly recognized something special in the young Chinese scholar.

"Wei Chen was one of the more involved and proactive students in our IMBA program," Taylor says. "He seemed to know early that he wanted to be an entrepreneur and thirsted for knowledge that would help him be successful in that endeavor. And successful he has become, beyond our biggest imagination and possibly far exceeding his own."

## Creating values

In 1998, with his IMBA degree in hand, Chen combined his newly acquired business savvy with international insight and entrepreneurial spirit by creating Sunshine Enterprise. He leased a small office — at 200 square feet, it was more like a closet — on Poplar Avenue in Memphis and began exploring ways to foster efficient business relations between China and the U.S., two countries growing more and more dependant on each other in an ever-shrinking world.

The lessons Chen learned at the U of M proved fruitful. “As I started my own business in the international business field, the education from the International MBA program was extremely helpful,” he says. “With my internship experience at an insurance company, I was able to understand U.S. corporate culture and communicate with employees and customers better.”

Through Sunshine Enterprise, Chen built a network of U.S. and Chinese companies directly involved with manufacturing and logistics, the industries that produce the world’s goods and ensure their delivery to destinations everywhere. With U.S. headquarters in Memphis and Chinese headquarters in Shenzhen, in the Guangdong Province, Sunshine Enterprise acquired privately held companies in both countries that would benefit by sharing infrastructural resources such as warehouses and factories, and administrative resources such as accounting, procurement, logistics, distribution and information technology.

The company’s mission statement is “Creating values for employees, customers and vendors by bridging the differences between the U.S. and China within manufacturing.”

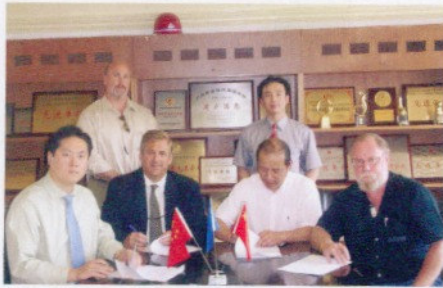
As its portfolio grew, so did the accolades for Sunshine Enterprise. It was recognized as one of the “Fast 50” companies in the state by *Business Tennessee* magazine. And Chen won 2006 Executive of the Year by *Business Tennessee* and 2007 Executive of the Year by the *Memphis Business Journal*.

### Center of it all

While the honors are nice, Chen quantifies success by the jobs and opportunities he creates. Sunshine Enterprise now employs 400 people worldwide — including 30 in its Memphis headquarters — with U.S. subsidiaries in New York, Los Angeles, Houston and Atlanta,



U of M alumnus Wei Chen has turned Sunshine Enterprise Inc. into a multimillion-dollar business with a mission of bridging the cultural gap between his native China and the United States.



Chen spends a fair amount of time conducting business overseas in China while the U.S.-based portion of Sunshine Enterprise is located in Memphis. Chen, who holds an International Master's of Business from the U of M, is also an aviation enthusiast.

and Chinese operations in Shenzhen, Shanghai, Wuxi and Chenzhou.

Despite his company's expansive footprint, Chen says the company is committed to Memphis, where a community and a college helped cultivate Sunshine Enterprise's rapid growth.

"It is a good location. It is centrally located," Chen says. "As the cost of living in Memphis is more affordable than other big cities, our company can remain competitive by centralizing many corporate functions in the headquarters, like

accounting, logistics, administration, purchasing, etc. Also, Memphis is easier to fly to than other cities and the airport is not as crowded. The traffic in Memphis is not bad as well, therefore we can be more productive. It has big-city advantages and small-city convenience."

More than anything, Memphis — home to FedEx Corp. and the world's busiest cargo airport — has emerged as a key player in globalization, in which international trade serves as the cornerstone of a virtually borderless economy. The city's diverse logistics sector and its robust transportation network of air, rail, road and river means that many of the products made in China pass through the Bluff City.

China is also working to improve within.

"China has improved human rights issues tremendously in the last five years; they will continue to improve," Chen says. "As the current toy recall and food safety issues show, there are challenges on how China can improve its product safety regulations and quality standards. The U.S. needs to implement more regulations to make sure the products meet the standards before they reach U.S. land."

### Giving back

When Chen himself reached the U.S. more than a decade ago, he was single. But the U of M helped him in that capacity as well. He met his wife, Isabel (MS '98, PhD '01), while she was a doctoral student in biomedical engineering. Chen says Isabel also attended school on scholarship, so the couple is doubly thankful for the U of M's financial aid.

"For her and for me, it was important for our careers and our education," Chen says.

Because of that, Chen decided to give back to the University as soon as his business started doing well. He committed to donate scholarship money and hire interns from the University — the two

factors that provided the foundation of his own success — and his support hasn't gone unnoticed.

"The thing that I admire most about Wei Chen is his dedication to the community and the University of Memphis from which he graduated," Taylor says. "He has become a respected leader within the Chinese community by supporting charitable causes and providing scholarships to worthy students. He has been even more widely recognized with his strong support of other Memphis community endeavors and very strong support of the University."

Taylor noted Chen's considerable donation to the IMBA program, as well as his support of the University's MILE (Memphis Institute for Leadership Education) leadership mentoring program. Taylor says it's Chen's donation of time to mentor students that shows his true measure.

"I am extremely proud of his business accomplishments," Taylor says, "but even more proud of the man and the citizen he has become."

Though Chen lives and works in Memphis, he travels to China a few times each year for business and to spend time reconnecting with his Chinese heritage. On a recent visit, he and his wife took their two children — Elizabeth, 4, and Stephanie, 1 — to experience the Chinese New Year. And Chen, who says he is blessed with many good employees and friends, regularly takes them with him to enjoy the "hospitality of Chinese culture."

Whenever he journeys back to China, and whenever he donates time and money back to the U of M, Wei Chen exemplifies a simple philosophy that defines his success as a person and an executive.

"Everyone," he says, "needs to remember where they came from." 🐾

