

Practitioner, Advocate, and Facilitator in the Knowledge Management World — Knowledge Management Forum Interview with Wu Qinghai, Postdoctoral Researcher, Founder and CEO of Xingzhe Hulian (Print Edition)

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Abstract

KMF: Greetings, Dr. Wu. As we embark upon the new year of 2018, we welcome you, as the Associate Editor of our *Knowledge Management Forum* and a long-standing friend to our readership, to this inaugural expert interview of the new year. This spring, we look forward to engaging in an in-depth dialogue with you regarding the trends and dynamics of knowledge management in the new era.

We are aware that over the past two years you have been exceedingly busy yet remarkably fulfilled, having experienced the arduous struggles of entrepreneurship, undergone career transitions and transformations, and gained profound insights from pursuing knowledge abroad—experiences that undoubtedly encompass many compelling narratives. Today, we wish to conduct this exchange in the spirit of old friends, while simultaneously aligning with the scholarly orientation of our academic journal, to focus on topical issues within the knowledge management domain that possess both theoretical and practical dimensions, both present and future, and to solicit your personal perspectives and reflections.

Full Text

Preamble: The Genesis of the Sun Wukong Platform

The origin of the “Sun Wukong Platform” can be traced back to October 2015, when we organized the China Knowledge Management Alliance Conference in Beijing at the request of industry peers. The event drew nearly five to six hundred participants, attracting virtually all domestic knowledge management practitioners and researchers for enthusiastic exchange. The conference proved

unexpectedly successful, igniting entrepreneurial passion among many attendees. This success was no accident; it signaled that China's knowledge management community had reached a "tipping point." After more than a decade of development, as domestic enterprises increasingly recognized the importance of knowledge management, many successful companies had appointed dedicated leaders who called themselves KMers (Knowledge Managers). These professionals regularly organized spontaneous activities and discussions, while social media and online communities accelerated their connections and enhanced efficiency, leading to more frequent offline visits and exchanges. The demand for deeper engagement continued to grow.

Following the 2015 conference, we deeply sensed this market demand for knowledge management in China and believed it could become an enterprise that helps organizations rapidly create value and achieve sustainable success. At that time, I was serving as Chief Knowledge Officer at COFCO Nutrition and Health Research Institute. After brief consideration—essentially weighing whether to remain in this enviable position or venture out to pursue what I truly wanted—I discussed my intentions with COFCO's leadership and received their support. Thus, the Sun Wukong knowledge management brand was born.

The 18-Year Coming-of-Age Ceremony: Chinese Knowledge Management Practice from 2001 to 2018

KMF: From our review of this journey, we can see that the title "Xingzhe" (Walker/Practitioner) did not emerge only when you started your business in 2016. In fact, since you began your first KM position at Lenovo Group in 2001, you have been a "walker" on China's knowledge management path—a "pioneer" and "advocate" of knowledge management who has successfully navigated diverse business forms, from private enterprises (Lanling) to foreign enterprises (Siemens), state-owned enterprises (COFCO), and now entrepreneurship (founding the Sun Wukong Platform). This is truly admirable. Our first question is: How do you interpret the concept of "Sun Wukong" and its current positioning?

Wu Qinghai: In spring 2016, I decided to resign and start my own business, establishing a company called "Xingzhe Hulian" (Walker Interconnection). At the time, many people not only questioned why I would leave a management position at a Fortune 500 company but also wondered about the meaning behind naming the new platform "Sun Wukong."

My response is that life is a process of choices and trade-offs—without giving up, there is no gain. My original intention was simply to make the Sun Wukong Platform a genuine, virtuous, and beautiful knowledge platform where every skilled craftsman could realize commercial value and elevate their spiritual realm and soul.

As for why I chose "Sun Wukong," it was born in the Year of the Monkey (2016), which is one reason (laughs). But more importantly, Sun Wukong is a major IP widely known in China—powerful and capable of anything. In

the internet era, having a strong IP is crucial. Second, Sun Wukong's mission was to retrieve scriptures and spread knowledge, which aligns perfectly with our business model. Most importantly, "Xingzhe" itself means practitioner, a concept I have repeatedly emphasized: knowledge must be transformed into actionable capability.

KMF: From the historical coordinate of these "18 years," what do you perceive as the greatest changes or progress? Do you think Chinese enterprise knowledge management practice, which took shape at the dawn of the 21st century, has reached the stage of holding a "coming-of-age ceremony"?

Wu Qinghai: Looking back at these 18 years, we have indeed evolved from an "ideological germination period" to a "practical experimentation period," and gradually into a "period of enhanced integration of knowledge and action." Whether we have truly "come of age" remains to be seen and depends on the criteria used. Compared to abroad, the most distinctive feature of Chinese enterprise knowledge management is its market diversity—various industries, companies, and business forms. This "hundred flowers blooming" of market demand and "hundred schools contending" of market supply represents a significant characteristic and opportunity unique to China.

Chinese knowledge management practice has not yet formed a unified "template" or "model"; everyone is actively exploring and experimenting. However, Chinese enterprises have recently won three global MAKE (IOU) awards (China Merchants Securities, COFCO Nutrition and Health Research Institute, and SF Express), demonstrating international-level achievement. From this perspective, I believe Chinese knowledge management has reached "adulthood." (Note: MAKE stands for Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise Award, a globally recognized honor in enterprise knowledge management co-hosted by Teleos and the KNOW Network. It recognizes organizations that successfully transform tacit and explicit corporate knowledge and intellectual capital into exceptional products/services/solutions that create value.) The MAKE awards are divided into global awards and national/regional awards (such as the Asian MAKE Award). The global awards further categorize into Group Organization Awards and Independent Operating Unit (IOU) Awards. China's three global MAKE awards were all IOU awards; we have yet to win a Group Organization Award. Regular winners of the group organization award include Accenture, Google, Apple, Microsoft, IBM, McKinsey, GE, and BP—companies that represent the future benchmark for Chinese enterprises.

The "Three Flowers of Knowledge Management": Sequence and Relationship

KMF: You have mentioned the "Three Flowers of Knowledge Management" on various occasions to describe three generations of KM theoretical schools and implementation models. Some of our readers may be encountering this concept for the first time. Could you briefly introduce it? Specifically, what is

the relationship among these “flowers”? What are their respective “blooming periods”? What “fruits” have they borne? More importantly, what are the drivers and patterns behind their blossoming? Will there be a “fourth” or “fifth” flower in the future?

Wu Qinghai: Knowledge management encompasses many theoretical schools and practical models, but from an evolutionary perspective, we can summarize them into three stages, which I call the Three Flowers of Knowledge Management: Knowledge Assetization, Knowledge Contextualization, and Knowledge Ecologization.

(1) First Flower: Knowledge Assetization

When knowledge management first emerged in the 1990s, the traditional approach focused on the most visible and tangible aspects. Consequently, many organizations initially emphasized collecting documents, establishing knowledge repositories, categorizing information, designing standardized organizational taxonomies, and configuring access permissions based on user roles. As content grew, knowledge search and statistics functions became increasingly important, supplemented by knowledge maps for thematic clustering, analysis, and visualization.

This approach resembles building a large library where knowledge is placed on different shelves for easy retrieval when needed. This primitive yet straightforward concept focuses organizations on explicit knowledge and content development. We call this implementation model “Knowledge Assetization,” where the key lies in content and the primary strategy is accumulation.

[Figure 1: see original paper]

This content-oriented model emphasizing explicit knowledge remains the preferred key strategy for many organizations implementing knowledge management, with most enterprises having experienced this stage. However, it has exposed several issues in practice: How can we continuously and effectively encourage employees to submit knowledge? How can we ensure accumulated knowledge assets are widely utilized to generate value? How can we excavate and manage the knowledge inside employees’ minds? How do we manage creative work outside standardized processes? How do we ensure timely knowledge updates for fast-paced businesses?

(2) Second Flower: Knowledge Contextualization

Huawei’s founder Ren Zhengfei once said: “Let those who hear the gunfire call for artillery.” Frontline knowledge workers closest to customers and scenes possess more vivid and effective knowledge and experience than managers and executives in the rear. Ikujiro Nonaka emphasized that innovation typically stems from individual beliefs and particularly stressed the importance of tacit

knowledge, differing significantly from the American approach of “knowledge management as building computer databases.”

The most valuable knowledge is not obtained from others but generated internally. Contextualizing knowledge—relying on the “here,” “now,” “this situation,” and “this scene” to construct knowledge within a comprehensive knowledge field—represents the “Knowledge Contextualization” implementation model. The key lies in people, and the primary strategy is connection, embodying the principle of right timing, right place, right people, right action.

In this second flower, practical strategies include communities of practice, knowledge secrets, knowledge experts, and knowledge points. Typical cases include the U.S. Army’s AAR (After Action Review), Lenovo’s “Fupan” (Review), COFCO’s C3 strategy (Connect, Communicate, Collaborate), and Huawei’s knowledge management framework that equally emphasizes explicit knowledge management, experience management, and collective wisdom management.

(3) Third Flower: Knowledge Ecologization

When the human brain learns, simply extending existing cognition yields limited results. Effective learning requires deconstruction, combination, and reconstruction. It is through different combinations of cognition that new knowledge is created. Therefore, building a knowledge ecosystem that aggregates wisdom to form knowledge diversity and stimulates individual creativity, thereby awakening inner wisdom, constitutes the “Knowledge Ecologization” model. The key lies in cultivating the ecosystem, and the primary strategy is creation.

In the third flower, only innovation can bridge discontinuities and serve as the primary driver of progress. If we cannot achieve self-breakthrough, we become blinded, and past success becomes our greatest future obstacle. Disruptive innovation rarely emerges within the same pipeline because we engage in continuous thinking. To generate disruptive innovation, we must change pipelines, empty our existing cognition as much as possible, and absorb different ideas and thinking modes.

A typical strategy for nurturing knowledge ecology is constructing a knowledge market with both knowledge providers and demanders forming an ecological knowledge trading marketplace. The transactions involve diverse knowledge products and services: articles, books, practical experience, training courses, consulting, patents, trademarks, design creativity, audio-visual content, etc.

(4) Relationship Among the Three Flowers

I believe there is a “sequence” among these three flowers, representing an ascending progression toward essence. However, this does not mean the second flower must wait for the first to bloom; some enterprises may develop them simultaneously or start with the second flower. There is no rigid sequential relationship. Nevertheless, the general development path typically begins with

knowledge assetization, followed by knowledge contextualization. The current knowledge ecologization flower requires an ecological market and has not yet fully bloomed, though its scent can be faintly detected in the internet domain. I most hope to see this third flower blossom more widely across enterprise fields. Of course, there may be fourth and fifth flowers in the future, ultimately creating a colorful garden.

Ultimately, the blooming of the first, second, or Nth flower is merely external manifestation. The core requires roots and soil. What are the “roots” of knowledge management? I have been contemplating this and believe the root lies in KMer professional faith and values—including the craftsman spirit of striving for excellence and achieving corporate sustainability through the unity of knowledge and action. As long as these roots exist and enterprises believe that knowledge management and reuse can generate value and change destiny, regardless of which flower blooms, fruits will eventually appear.

Perspectives on the Formation of China’s Knowledge Market Ecosystem

KMF: In your discussion of the “third flower,” the knowledge marketplace (or knowledge market) is a core concept and important carrier that supports knowledge transactions, products, and services. The concept of “knowledge market” first appeared in the book *Working Knowledge* by renowned enterprise knowledge scholar Davenport, initially referring only to internal knowledge trading markets within organizations.

Today in China, we witness the rapid development and maturation of a society-wide “knowledge market.” On one hand, this manifests as public knowledge consumption upgrading and strong demand; on the other hand, it appears as the rise of various knowledge products and services on the supply side—think tanks for senior decision-makers, internet knowledge service providers for the general public, “private board meetings” you have mentioned, and your Sun Wukong Platform, all possessing knowledge service attributes and value. How do you view the flourishing of China’s knowledge market and its opportunities and challenges?

Wu Qinghai: We have just reached a cooperation agreement with a government think tank institution. We believe the crucial role between knowledge supply and demand sides is knowledge intermediation and trading. We can aggregate dispersed expert wisdom to form an expert think tank that provides various knowledge services to meet different needs. For the Sun Wukong Platform, we previously focused primarily on enterprise knowledge demand, but now we also see platforms like Dedao, Ximalaya, and Fenda effectively tapping and activating individual users’ knowledge demand, reflecting broader societal knowledge needs.

Regarding different knowledge service formats, we know that library and information science has traditionally promoted knowledge services, and I have also

observed the transformation of the publishing industry toward knowledge services from my friends in that sector. Publishing previously focused on planning, packaging, and producing books, hoping for bestsellers and good profits—but that was where it ended, without truly cultivating and mining the authors’ potential. Now the publishing industry hopes to combine “content” with “people.” I particularly agree with this, especially since AI can now generate “content,” though such content remains lifeless. The future trend should be “people + content,” where both people and content are part of the “field.”

The field does not necessarily present itself as content; it can also be created through dialogue and “BA” (Note: BA from Japanese, meaning “field,” proposed by Ikujiro Nonaka, referring to the shared space in organizations where knowledge is shared, created, and used—the birthplace of organizational “meaning”). In the living present, it can stimulate everyone’s creativity and insight. Our society and organizations can create different fields at all times—this is the next evolutionary realm that knowledge management needs to achieve.

A typical representative of this is the “private board meeting.” Since I became deeply involved last year, I have discovered it is an excellent “field” for stimulating tacit knowledge and externalizing entrepreneurs’ inner wisdom—something previously overlooked in knowledge management practice. A private board meeting is a gathering where business managers discuss issues; the knowledge generated comes not only from past experiences but is created “in the moment” within the “field” through facilitation, inspiration, and catalysis. We often call that moment “MOM” (Moment of Magic)—a magical moment of epiphany. This moment cannot be precisely predicted but may occur at any time during field cultivation.

How is this magical moment created? Not by professors or coaches telling you what to do, but by entrepreneurs presenting their problems, receiving guidance, and then being questioned by peer entrepreneurs, leading to self-realization and emergence. I believe this approach can also solve problems in corporate teams and for individual employees—for example, letting CKOs learn from CKOs, KMers from KMers, and employees from each other.

KMF: These observations also reflect the emergence of different knowledge service models. From 2016 to the present, many new knowledge service formats have appeared on the supply side. “Knowledge service” is not a new concept—it has been promoted in library and information science for decades. However, this wave of “knowledge service” has gained commercial favor, dramatically changing the market environment. As a participant in the knowledge market, how do you view the differences among various knowledge service formats? After two years of development since 2016, have you gained new observations and reflections on the knowledge market, knowledge payment, and knowledge services?

Wu Qinghai: I completely agree with your observations. As China’s internet industry has developed, we have “leapfrogged” into the internet era with certain latecomer advantages compared to many developed countries. China’s current

knowledge management and knowledge service field exhibits similar characteristics.

Particularly in 2016, which we call the “first year of knowledge payment,” platforms like Dedao, Ximalaya, and Fenda emerged. To some extent, China’s knowledge service format development has already led other countries. I welcome these explorations and remain confident about them.

Regarding the enterprise knowledge management and service field, I chose to start my business because I believe the “knowledge market” carrying “knowledge transactions” is maturing, enabling knowledge to become a “consumable.” Knowledge demanders and suppliers can reach agreements, thereby promoting knowledge to directly create value. Although current knowledge payment formats still have many immaturities, I believe that by following market principles and continuous exploration, we may discover a new model and open a new situation. I look forward to seeing China’s knowledge management community achieve “leapfrog” development on a global scale.

Insights from Overseas Conferences and Engaging with Experts

KMF: Over the past two years, you have attended conferences and studied in Japan and the United States—the two most developed economies—while also participating in multiple international knowledge management conferences. From these cross-national and cross-cultural comparisons, what aspects of knowledge management in developed countries deserve our attention and learning? Where does China need to improve and catch up?

Wu Qinghai: Over the past two years, I attended the 8th IKMAP “Asia Pacific Innovation and Knowledge Management Conference” in Kobe, Japan, and the KMWorld Conference in Washington, D.C. I sensed that an overall gap still exists, particularly in the United States where foreign counterparts demonstrate extremely high professionalism. CKO titles are commonplace on their business cards, while few in China use this title—this represents a huge difference.

The U.S. knowledge management community harbors many hidden talents; it is easy to encounter experts with 20 or 30 years of KM practice experience. These seasoned professionals frequently gather at conferences like these. Japan primarily follows Ikujiro Nonaka’s school, which I believe aligns more with my vision for the future direction of knowledge management. The U.S., leveraging its advantages in information technology, is very forward-looking in information search, knowledge classification, and content management, but I feel they neglect human value. The Japanese knowledge management school believes technology merely manages “information,” whereas Nonaka’s knowledge management is triggered and generated by people, emphasizing “field” (BA).

Returning to China, I believe our greatest advantage lies in our massive market

and diverse demands. We should fully utilize “technology” as a powerful tool, riding the wave of big data and artificial intelligence, but ultimately we need to unleash human potential and return to human essence. I believe China’s greatest asset for the future remains with its people: enabling every employee to strive for excellence and dedication; empowering every manager to better develop their employees; and encouraging more successful people in society to contribute their love. This will make our individuals, enterprises, and society better.

Unity of Knowledge and Action: Ascending from Knowledge to Wisdom

KMF: Through our collaboration with you, we at the Documentation and Information Center of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the *Knowledge Management Forum* journal feel that as a business manager and entrepreneur, you possess strong scholarly temperament and commitment. Your writings and articles not only involve daily operational details but also frequently reveal classical style, mindfulness, literary grace, and philosophical reflection. We believe many share this perception. How do you balance knowledge management research and practice? How do you balance the pursuit of efficiency in business with the pursuit of truth in knowledge? And how do you balance busy work affairs with family and personal space?

Wu Qinghai: I believe all knowledge must ultimately be applied, so I focus primarily on application. However, I have discovered in practice that application alone is insufficient—it must be guided by theory. Therefore, based on practice, I review literature, consult experts, and collaborate with universities. I feel practitioners should not be limited to practice but must elevate and improve their conceptual understanding.

Knowledge and action are inherently unified. If my “knowledge” does not reach a certain height, my “action” will certainly have problems. Conversely, if I cannot step out of theory and remain in an ivory tower, the “knowledge” I obtain will not be authentic. Thus, the unity of knowledge and action is a faith and conviction that everyone should uphold.

When we currently correlate knowledge with theory and action with practice, this is actually still at a relatively superficial level. True unity of knowledge and action requires self-cultivation. The “one” in unity of knowledge and action means “non-duality” and “consistency.” We say that wisdom arises from stability; when your mind remains unmoved, you can fully open your wisdom treasury, transcend the superficial level of current knowledge, and enter a higher realm of wisdom.

Regarding work, life, and family, I sometimes feel extremely busy with countless tasks. We also engage in some dissemination activities annually, such as publishing classic knowledge management books. When these matters converge, I feel it is essential to identify priorities and make choices and trade-offs among them.

This allows you to allocate time to what you consider most valuable—such as life, accompanying children, and dissemination. Life always involves choices; too many choices create confusion. I am the same and am gradually learning to subtract, focusing on deepening and thoroughly accomplishing what I consider life's most valuable endeavor. (End)

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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