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Turtles Show Way to Prosperity

BY VINCENT M. MALLOZZI DECEMBER 26, 2011 6:22 PM [Comment](#)



Earl Wilson/The New York Times Passers-by gaze into the display window at a pearl store in Manhattan whose owner keeps turtles because they helped save his family from poverty.

The turtles in a large aquarium in a Midtown window often bring passers-by to a halt, even those used to seeing the unexpected.

“Everyone who passes this store wants to know about the turtles,” said Johnny Lu, whose business specializes in the manufacture and sale of coral and pearl jewelry. “I tell them that my family owes everything we have to the turtles.”

Mr. Lu, a fisherman’s son who grew up in the Penghu Islands off the western coast of Taiwan, was 8 when a typhoon destroyed his father’s boat and fishing equipment, plunging his family into despair.

“We nearly starved to death,” said Mr. Lu, 58, who is one of 11

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children. “We ate rotten potatoes for months. We couldn’t afford rice. My mother went to the temple every day and prayed for some kind of miracle, but our situation seemed hopeless. We weren’t starting again from the ground up; we were starting from somewhere beneath the ground.”

Mr. Lu’s mother and father, Lu Hong Kui-Su and Lu Ching-Shui, began making ends meet by collecting coral shells along the golden beaches of Penghu, decorating the shells as jewelry and selling them to local residents.

And then, one tiny step at a time, their miracle began to arrive.

Mr. Lu’s father noticed that turtles roaming the Penghu Islands — also called the Pescadores — often nestled in pearl beds in shallow and deeper waters. He began following the trails of hundreds of turtles and discovered thousands upon thousands of pearls, which he began to sell, along with the coral shells, as jewelry.

In a short time, Mr. Lu’s father became a well-to-do pearl farmer. He opened a factory in Taipei to produce pearl necklaces and other jewelry, and before long, American and other foreign retailers were demanding his product.

The family kept expanding the business. In 1984, Mr. Lu opened a pearl store in Manhattan. Two years later, he, his parents and his siblings created a second, much larger pearl farm on Hainan Island, in the South China Sea.

At 246 West 38th Street, Mr. Lu has one of his three Manhattan stores. It is also where about two dozen turtles raise the curiosity of people on the street.



Earl Wilson/The New York Times
Johnny Lu says turtles were the reason his family was able to succeed in the pearl business.

“This business will remain with my family for generations to come,” said Mr. Lu, whose Lucoral and Lupearl Corporation also has manufacturing and wholesale arms. “We have a lot of nieces and nephews to put to work.”

One of Mr. Lu’s sisters, Flora Lu, runs the Lucoral Museum and Gift Shop in Honolulu.

In a telephone interview, she said: “I remember being a little girl on the islands, always looking for pearls and for coral shells to recycle because we were really struggling. On the Penghu Islands, turtles are seen as good luck charms, as symbols of hope. Those turtles certainly brought my family good luck. Looking back now, it all seems like a fairy tale.”

Other siblings operate wholesaling and distribution businesses in Hawaii, Hong Kong, mainland China and Japan, and the Lu family’s pearls are sold by retailers in 40 countries, including the United States, Britain, France and Italy.

“Mr. Lu is the godfather of the pearl business,” said Hesham Abdelrahman, a salesman at the 38th Street store, which is called

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the Lucoral and Lupearl Company.

“Up until the mid-1990s, the Lu family pretty much controlled the entire pearl industry, and though other competitors started jumping into the marketplace, the Lu family is still one of the largest and best-known pearl distributors in the world.”

To help illustrate his point, Mr. Abdelrahman pointed to a wall filled with photographs and letters from first ladies who have worn Lu pearls, including Michelle Obama, Barbara Bush and Nancy Reagan, and from Margaret Thatcher, the former British prime minister.

“The beautiful coral tree with the amethyst base is a work of art and one I will always treasure,” Mrs. Reagan wrote to Mr. Lu in 1981 after visiting the family’s pearl factory in Taipei.

As he fed his turtles one morning, Mr. Lu, who also teaches jewelry making, noted that many of the turtles are donated by local residents whose children have gone off to school and can no longer care for them.

“I tell my neighbors, ‘Bring all of your turtles to me, I’ll take care of them,’ ” Mr. Lu said. “Turtles once saved my entire family, so as long as I’m here, they will always have a home.”

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