

Albert Chen: The Face of Indianapolis' Ethnic Chinese Business Community Kai Qin



Albert often refers to himself with the modest nickname "Taxi Driver," aptly illustrating his spirit of public service

Albert Chen, birth name Chen Min-Yu, is the CEO and chairman of Telamon Corporation. He has also endeavored to promote the prosperity of the Asian-American community in Indiana, where he is highly respected as an exemplary businessman.

In 1979, Albert Chen, working at the time as a manager at the GTE Corporation, was sent by the company to Indiana from his former home in Everett, Washington. He wasn't quite sure in his heart how things would work out when he first set foot on Midwestern soil, but he decided to try it out for three months and see how he might like living in the area long-term.

In the thirty-plus years that followed, Indianapolis fundamentally transformed itself before his very eyes. The suburb where Albert resides, Carmel, topped the list of MONEY's Best Places to Live in America in 2012. As CEO and Chairman of Telamon, he has become the de facto leader of the region's Asian-American business community.

Albert's Chinese name is Chen Min-Yu. In 1968, he came to America from Taiwan, looking to find a job in accounting. He was twenty-five years old at the time.

Getting work proved to be difficult, so he enrolled in Portland State College to continue his studies, with no scholarship support and only moderate knowledge of English. Later, he finally landed an accounting job on campus, and soon afterward switched his major from business to mathematics. After being hired at GTE, Albert earned the respect of his superiors, and by the time he was assigned to Indiana, was already supervising 700 employees.

As part of GTE's downsizing initiative in 1984, Albert was asked to dismiss 200 employees—a task he found highly unpleasant. Following this incident, Albert decided to resign, and, in 1985, he founded Telamon Corporation. Some of the biggest reasons he chose to stay in Indiana to build his business included the state's relaxed lifestyle, low taxes, affordable rent, and convenient transportation.

Telamon has since grown to become the ninth-largest privately owned company in the Indianapolis area, specializing in telecom, energy efficiency, industrial assembly, business process outsourcing, and telehealth services. It is especially worth noting that Telamon, in collaboration with Johnson Melloh Solutions, recently won a contract for the expansion of the Indianapolis International Airport solar farm, making it the world's largest airport-based system.

In the local community, Albert is admired as an ambassador of Asian American culture. He gets along well with people from all walks of life. Former Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels said the following about Albert: "He's one of my favorite people, and one I admire the most. He has invested a great deal of energy and capital to spur growth in Indiana—he has truly spared no effort. He is one of the state's most outstanding citizens."

Albert believes that the prerequisite to gaining respect for ethnic Chinese people living in America is to actively participate in public affairs. For example, only rarely do ethnic Chinese take part in the area's large-scale fundraising efforts—but to Albert, it doesn't really matter what you donate. Even a few hundred dollars would be enough. What matters is the spirit of participation.

For almost the past two decades, Albert has worked tirelessly to promote the prosperity of Asian Americans living in Indiana. As early as 1999, he founded the Asian American Alliance, Inc., with the mission to inspire central Indiana Asian Americans to serve and lead. Albert has organized professional development programs aimed at helping Asian Americans who have strong research abilities but little managerial training to improve their management and cross-cultural communication skills.



A Chen family portrait

Albert's most admired role model is magnate Warren Buffett. This isn't due primarily to Buffett's business acumen, but rather to his promise to donate the majority of his assets to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In light of Buffett's example, Albert was inspired to channel more of his earnings and energy into philanthropic activities. Because of this, in 2013, he established the Telamon Foundation to support Indiana's educational and arts programs.

Ambling behind Albert during a visit to Telamon, I passed by a multitude of awards and trophies displayed in the lobby and hallway. I observed as he greeted workers as they walked by. He introduced everything about the company with palpable relish, as if he were showing me his own home. All of a sudden it occurred to me: behind the glory of this ethnic Chinese leader, successful entrepreneur, and devoted philanthropist, there was just a pure and simple spirit.

(Translated by Joshua Owen & Huiqi Zhou)



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