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Wu Eryu, Shanghai Airlines' most famous flight attendant, has received thousands of letters complimenting her exceptional service and frequently wins the monthly Favorite Flight Attendant Award.  
She also stands out from her fellow flight attendants in another way — she is 55 years old.  
"My first name, Eryu, means 'treating people warm and making people happy' in Chinese, which happens to be my job's core role," she said.  
"The key to providing a memorable travel experience is to wear a bright smile and meet passengers' every need."  
Wu recalled a time when she managed to calm an irritable passenger who was angry about a two-hour delay to his flight from Shenzhen, Guangdong province, to Shanghai.  
"I smiled and patiently explained the reasons for the delay, and this gradually eased his anger. This is the magic of providing service with a smile," she said.  
Being a flight attendant was never part of her life plan. The Shanghainese first worked as an apprentice in the Shanghai Textile Factory after graduating from a technical school in the 1980s. She then became a file clerk at the archives department affiliated to the factory. Her job revolved around managing technical drawings and sorting them into different categories, issuing these drawings to workers and retrieving them after products were manufactured.  
"It was a decent job at that time. Most people preferred to work in State-owned companies because they provided a stable income," said Wu, who met her husband Li Nengyan while working at the factory.  
It was also a good time to be in the textile industry as it was in the midst of a boom. According to a report from Shanghai Municipal Archives, a record high of 551,600 people worked in the former Shanghai Textile Industry Bureau in 1988.  
But the job was not the iron rice bowl she thought it would be.  
Starting in 1992, the traditionally labor-intensive industry faced serious overcapacity issues and this led the local government in Shanghai to restructure the industry which resulted in the retrenchment of thousands of textile workers, most of whom were middle-aged women. Wu was one of them.  
In 1994, the officials of the All China Women's Federation and the Shanghai Women's Federation persuaded the leaders of Shanghai Airlines to recruit women — those aged between 22 and 36 — from this group of laid-off workers. It was a landmark decision to do so, Wu recalled, as most flight attendants during that time were no more than 23 years old.  
Wu was among the 2,700 people who applied for the new flight attendant positions made available. After passing many rounds of tests, she became one of the 18 women to join the airline. For the next six months, they underwent more than 13 courses ranging from special passenger services, emergency response and service regulations.  
Getting selected to become a flight attendant also gave Wu the chance to witness the rapid development of civil aviation.  
"Shanghai Airlines only had eight aircrafts in the 1990s. Air tickets were very exclusive items that were only meant for those who had recommendation letters, identification papers and employment certificates provided by employers," she recalled.  
Airplanes then become a common mode of transportation and not a symbol of luxury. Shanghai Airlines now flies 140 routes to 60 domestic and international destinations, with its Boeing series fleet equipped with various in-flight entertainment systems.  
Wu passionately embraced her new profession, working out during her spare time to prevent airsickness as well as learning English and Putonghua, or standard Mandarin, to better communicate with her colleagues and passengers.  
Her efforts did not go unnoticed. In 1997, she won the Shanghai Model Worker Award before bagging the National Model Worker Award in 2000.  
"Wu's bright smile and excellent service garnered her thousands of admirers, which is exemplary for new employees," said Liu Shaoyong, the chairman of China Eastern, the parent company of Shanghai Airlines.  
In another nod to her aptitude for customer service, Shanghai Airlines established the Wu Eryu Cabin Crew in 2000 which comprised more than 100 flight attendants. Under Wu's leadership, the crew has received several accolades and awards, including the National Labor Medal. A book based on the work experiences of these flight attendants, titled Wu Eryu Service Rules, has also been published.  
True to her giving nature, Wu donated more than 7,000 yuan ($1,018) to help establish a fund to reward outstanding attendants. She recently made another notable contribution to the cause — by delaying retirement to continue working with the airlines.  
"I expect to train more flight attendants and will always be prepared to provide an unparalleled travel experience for passengers flying with Shanghai Airlines," she said.  
"Flight attendants are often seen as a symbol of beauty and youth in China, but passengers expect world-class service and not just pretty faces."

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