Mo Wang: Decoding the Psychology of Work and Retirement

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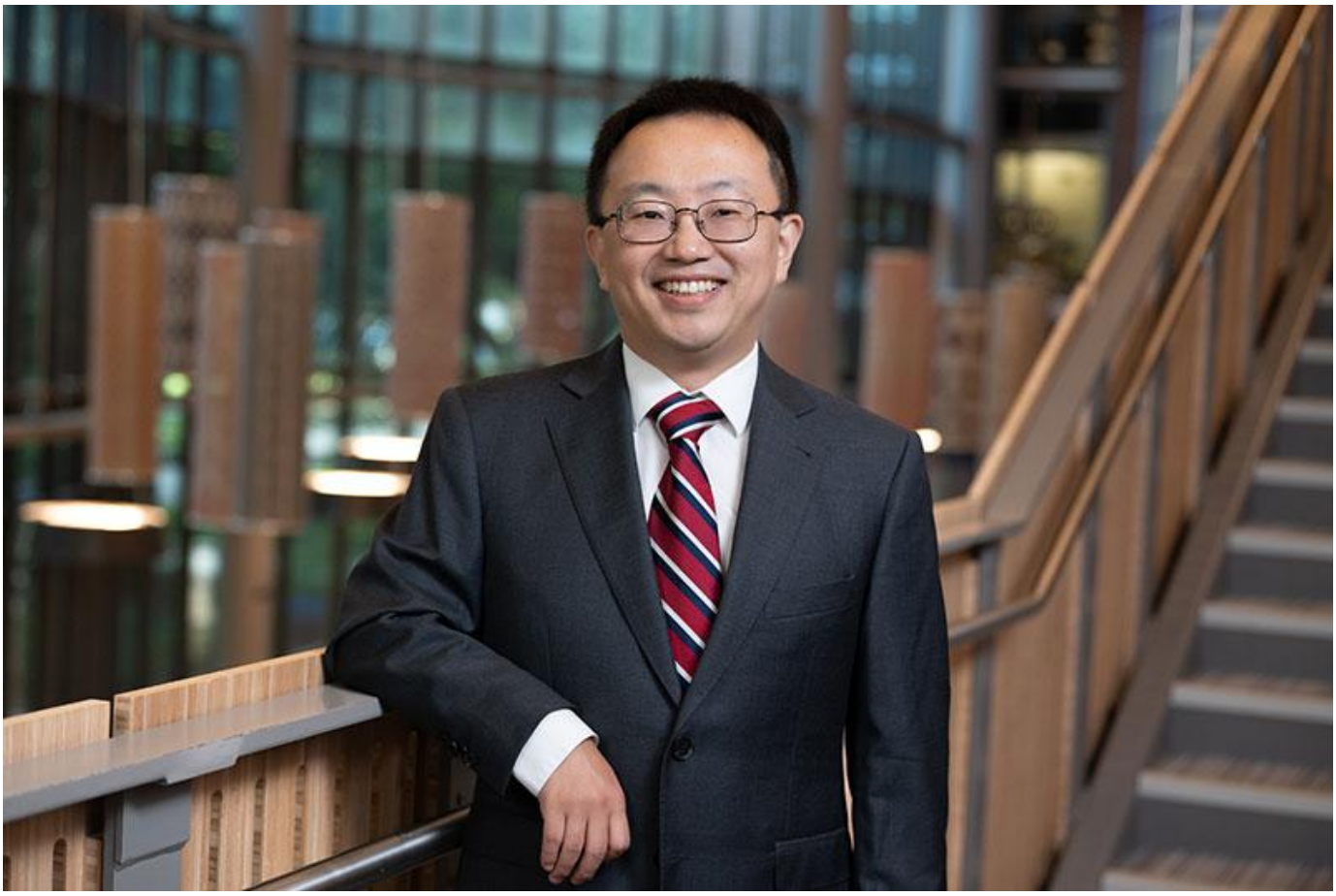

Mo Wang launched his career at a time when millions of baby boomers began ending theirs.

“My timing was good,” he recalls, because his doctoral dissertation examined how people adjust to retirement. It was published in the Journal of Applied Psychology in 2007 — only four years before the first boomers turned 65.

His topline finding — based on nationally representative longitudinal data from 2,000 retirees — was that for 70%, retirement did not significantly change their psychological well-being.

“For the majority of people, retirement isn’t a big deal,” he says. “A lot of times, people feel stressed when they face retirement, because they're worrying about bad things that may happen. I hope my research de-stresses people.”

He also identified factors that help make the transition more positive. They include a happy marriage and bridge employment, such as a part-time work or volunteer work.

Two decades and more than 230 peer-reviewed articles later, Wang brings his expertise on retirement and the psychology of work to the Freeman School of Business at Tulane University, where he serves as the Seinsheimer Chair in Business and Professor of Management.

Psychology of Work

It’s not surprising that Wang became interested in work. Growing up in Shanghai, China, his father was a manager for Volkswagen, while his mother was an accountant.

Psychology, however, was an accident. When Wang arrived at Peking University in Beijing, his test scores weren’t high enough to get into his first choice, environmental science. But they sufficed for his second choice: psychology.

It turned out to be a fortuitous choice. In a country focused on economic development, few students went into psychology — so few, that faculty outnumbered undergraduates. As a result, Wang says, “We got a lot of exposure to all different kinds of psychological disciplines. We learned from the best.”

Two subjects got him most excited in undergraduate study: industrial-organizational (IO) psychology and cognitive aging. When he moved on to graduate work at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, he got a dual doctorate degree in IO and

developmental psychology, in 2005.

Life After Work

Getting his dissertation published in a major journal marked Wang as a pioneer in retirement research. Prior researchers had focused on whether retirees had enough money. By contrast, he examined how people made decision to retire, what people did in retirement, and how they adjusted to retirement.

“I was able to create a new angle for understanding retirement, as a psychological, individualized process,” he says.

Today, he’s editor-in-chief of that journal. He was also tapped to edit "The Oxford Handbook of Retirement," now in its second edition. Its 39 chapters encompass psychological, economic, sociological, management and labor-industrial perspectives. Says Wang, “We recharted the research area for retirement.”

Adapting to Workplaces

Although retirement is Wang’s top research specialty, he has others related to work and organizational psychology.

One is newcomer adjustment: how people adapt when they’re new to an organization. “How do they learn from and build relationships with their colleagues?” he says. “How do they move from being an outsider to becoming an insider?”

Another interest is occupational health psychology. His research focuses on day-do-day stressors at work, such as work-family conflicts and dealing with mistreatment from customers. He showed that such factors can lead to behaviors such as alcohol misuse or unhealthy eating.

That finding fills an important gap in mental health literature, he says. Professionals tend to focus on stressors at home or in relationships.

“But actually, one-third of our lives, we’re working,” he says. “If you want to understand why people engage in dysfunctional behaviors, you should look into work experience as well.”

Adjusting to AI

Besides individual psychology, Wang studies the dynamics of teams. For the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, he recently co-chaired a consensus report on how to organize large, interdisciplinary teams for scientific work.

A 2025 paper looked at use of artificial intelligence tools at work – a form of human-AI teaming. He and his collaborators surveyed 104 call center employees at a South Korean bank. They were using an AI tool that offered suggestions while they talked to customers.

He found that the tool gave the workers useful knowledge they didn't already have. But its manner of presenting the knowledge created information overload.

"You have to talk to the customer at the same time that you're monitoring what's coming up on your screen," Wang says. Designers, he adds, "underestimated how hard it was to use."

He also found ways to ease information overload. He recommended additional training, to help workers become more open and engaging to AI.

Science and Practice

In projects like call center studies, Wang sees himself as a scientist-practitioner, "We're able to directly use our research findings to inform real-world practice," he says.

In that role, he's consulted with government agencies about retirement, briefed Congressional staffers about teams, and advised companies on selecting employees who fit their organizations.

"I'm very open to communicating with stakeholders about how our research can help improve society and people's lives," he says.

Now, he's bringing that attitude to the Freeman School, following 15 years at the University of Florida.

He was attracted partly by the school’s long history, he says. In 1916, it helped found the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which accredits business schools.

But he’s also looking to the future. With his background in lifespan development, he hopes to expand the school’s programs beyond traditional college students.

“The audience has changed,” he says. “It's not just the young people you need to educate. There’s a demand for lifelong learning, like an alumnus who’s in mid- or late-career and may want to come back.”

Today, he sees the school at the convergence of two major trends. “We’re at the intersection of both demographic change, with the population aging, and also technological change with AI,” he says. “We have a unique educational opportunity.”

Prepare Now for the Future of Business

In a world of rapid technological change, business leaders need to be grounded in both the latest research and the newest practices and tools, such as AI. The Freeman School of Business at Tulane University offers chances to conduct cutting-edge research and learn cutting-edge technologies, while putting them to use to help businesses in the real world. Learn more about the opportunities at the Freeman School and how it can help prepare you today for the business challenges of tomorrow.