

Wu cracks jokes on last trial day

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Former first lady Wu Shu-jen cracked jokes in court yesterday during her last appearance before a verdict is to be announced in September.

Presiding Judge Tsai Shou-hsun scheduled yesterday's court date to hear closing arguments from Wu, her lawyers and the prosecution.

She arrived at the Taipei District Court with a doctor and nurse from National Taiwan University Hospital, her caretaker and her son, Chen Chih-chung.

When Tsai asked whether she plead guilty or not guilty, Wu inquired whether she could have her lawyers answer.

Tsai instructed her to answer the question herself, and Wu said: "My answer is the same as before."

When the trial started at the beginning of the year, Wu pleaded guilty to forgery and two of the three counts of money laundering.

She admitted to using fake receipts to gain reimbursements from the presidential "state affairs" fund, but denied embezzling money from the fund and other charges of taking bribes in connection with a land deal and a government construction project.

Wu was initially indicted with three of former president Chen Shui-bian's former aides on Nov. 3, 2006, for allegedly siphoning off NT\$14.8 million (US\$439,000) from the fund.

Yesterday, Tsai asked Wu why her children's personal expenses, such as National Health Insurance premiums, were paid out of the presidential "state affairs fund."

Wu said: "I let Chen Chen-hui, the former first family's bookkeeper] take care of all that."

Wu said she didn't pay much attention to the books kept by Chen Chen-hui because she trusted her bookkeeper implicitly.

"[Chen Chen-hui] has been with us for a long time, I trust her," Wu said. "I only look at the bottom line. I don't pay attention to the detailed expenses."

When asked about receipts that were used to claim reimbursements from the fund, Wu said she was told by Chen Chen-hui and the former aides that they had to use receipts to claim reimbursements because the rules regarding the fund had changed, and that her only job was to "collect receipts."

"I told [my children] that if they had any receipts they should give them to me," she said.

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However, after allegations were leveled, “[my children] got scared when they saw receipts. They ripped them up,” she said.

Although Wu said she was so nervous her blood pressure rose, she answered many of Tsai’s questions in a light tone and often made jokes, evoking giggles from prosecutors and others in the courtroom.

She repeatedly said: “Women like to show off what they have bought” when Tsai asked how she knew about personal belongings her friends and relatives purchased, the receipts of which were later used to claim reimbursements.

In related news, Wu’s friend Tsai Ming-che yesterday pleaded guilty during his closing defense.

Prosecutors allege that because Tsai was a close friend of the former first lady, he had easy access to the presidential residence. Prosecutors say Tsai helped the Chen family solicit bribes and lined his pockets with a portion of the money as part of a deal between the government-run Hsinchu Science Park and Dayu Development Corp.

Prosecutors yesterday asked the court to pass a lighter sentence on Tsai because he was a key witness and showed remorse for his crimes.

The court plans to hear closing arguments from the former president today.

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