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From the Los Angeles Times

Couple gives UCLA \$1 million to further Chinese American studies

Bel-Air residents intend the gift to broaden understanding and educate the public and policymakers.

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Headlines about dangerous toys from China dominated the news for months last year, prompting congressional hearings and consumer questions about the Asian manufacturing giant's product safety.

But Walter and Shirley Wang, Bel-Air residents with three children, asked a different question: Where were the headlines pointing out that some of the problems were caused not by shoddy Chinese manufacturing practices but by American design flaws?

Concerned that China and ethnic Chinese are not always understood, the Wangs have stepped forward with a remedy.

On Friday, the Chinese American couple said that they would donate \$1 million to UCLA to establish the nation's first endowed academic chair on U.S.-China relations and Chinese American studies.

The gift will also fund a media program to educate the public and policymakers. The program will establish a website, media and policy handbook, and a database of experts about Chinese American issues.

"We're not saying we want people to be biased for China," Shirley Wang said. "But in every situation there are different views. We just want more understanding."

The gift marks the latest effort by the Wangs, owners of one of the world's largest plastic piping firms, to promote understanding of Chinese Americans and U.S.-China relations.

In 2000, they donated \$1.5 million to help finance the acclaimed PBS series "Becoming American: The Chinese Experience."

The couple's interest in public perceptions and media portrayals of Chinese Americans is in part a product of Shirley Wang's background: She is a 1990 UCLA graduate in communications, with an emphasis on business.

But their concerns were fanned by a 2001 survey of American attitudes toward China and Chinese Americans commissioned by the Committee of 100, a group of prominent Chinese Americans. That poll reported 68% of Americans surveyed viewed China as a future threat and nearly half believed that Chinese Americans were probably more loyal to China.

The survey also showed, however, majorities that viewed Chinese Americans as honest and as patriotic as other Americans, with strong family and educational values.

But the Wangs -- he a 42-year-old Taiwan native; she a 39-year old New York native raised in Taiwan -- have also given beyond the Chinese American community. A \$1.5-million donation established an endowed chair in pediatric surgery at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.

They are currently involved with the Earth Institute to donate hundreds of thousands of dollars of plastic piping to bring clean water to destitute villagers in Africa.

Why give? "It's very clear," Walter Wang said. "The strong helps the weak. The rich helps the poor. It's a great thing to give to others."

The Wangs' donations, which began eight years ago, reflect the emerging force of Chinese American philanthropy.

In recent years, a growing cadre of ethnic Chinese who came to the United States as immigrant students or entrepreneurs have begun giving back. Chinese Americans have donated millions of dollars, for instance, to construct the Chinese Garden at the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens.

The garden is set to open later this month.

"The Wangs represent a new breed of young, successful Chinese immigrant business people who want to give back to American society and . . . use their money to positively address important issues," said Don Nakanishi, who heads the UCLA Asian American Studies Center.

Nakanishi said the endowment would generate about \$50,000 a year to support the media program, offer scholarships and support the research of the chair holder, who has not yet been named.

The center has the largest Asian American studies program in the nation, with 45 faculty members, two academic journals, extensive archives and endowed chairs for research on Japanese Americans and Korean Americans.

Walter Wang said his charitable giving is "100%" inspired by his Christian faith.

His grandfather, the family's first Christian, used to take in homeless people to bathe, clothe and feed though he himself was poor, Wang said.

His father began a successful plastics firm and proceeded to use much of the profits for charity, building four hospitals.

Shirley Wang, too, recalls her grandmother always cooking extra and inviting hungry neighbors to share a meal.

"It's just an extra pair of chopsticks," Wang recalled her grandmother saying.

Walter Wang's near-fatal bout with nasal cancer three years ago -- and what both Wangs call a miraculous recovery -- deepened their passion to use their wealth to help others. "We rediscovered how precious life is," Walter Wang said.

"Through the love of God, we have to make a difference in people's lives."

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