

# **A Preface to the Summary of Wang Foundation's work in Service Learning and Poverty Alleviation**

by

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Martin Rees, the distinguished British scientist, has said that the odds of humanity surviving the 21<sup>st</sup> century are 1 in 2. On all sides, we are confronted with daunting, planet-wide problems: climate change, terrorism, deadly new diseases, critical depletion of natural resources, technological developments that outpace both adequate controls and ethical analysis, and widening gaps in wealth, education, and quality of life. And this is just a partial list. All of these problems have human origins, and all of them have human solutions. What is called for at this critical moment in human history is a recognition that the future of the planet is in our hands. If we fail to act intelligently and resolutely, the future for our species will become unbearably bleak—like a new Dark Ages, perhaps. If we act wisely and decisively, there could be a future of unprecedented peace, ecologically harmless affluence, and a rich culture with the most extraordinary creativity that humanity has known—a great time to be alive.

The following pages tell the story of the vision and actions of Peter Wang, a man who has dedicated his energies and personal resources to making a difference in the struggle for the future of humanity. Mr. Wang's special concern for the alleviation of poverty is reflected in both the theoretical work he has encouraged and in the practical service projects he has organized for college and university students.

Peter Wang understands that the critical challenges that must take place include, first and foremost, powerful new approaches to education. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new technologies have enabled us to bring state-of-the-art instructional resources and opportunities to places that have been off the educational grid. In addition, contemporary education offers exciting new approaches to the development of critical thinking, moral values, and leadership skills. Over the last decade, the idea of service-learning has been generating a great deal of interest. Peter Wang has been at the forefront of this movement with his pioneering work at Tsinghua

University, bringing over one thousand Chinese and American students together for service assignments in rural China.

While it is tempting to rank the greatest challenges facing the planet in terms of threat levels, the fact is that the most serious problems before us are interrelated. None of them can be understood properly without reference to the others. Systematic neglect of any of the problems will almost sure affect progress with the others. The critical issue of planetary water resources, for example, prompts attention to climate change, pollution, global poverty, economic justice, and so on. A proper approach to restoring balance in the natural world and in the human community requires interdisciplinary research and integrated action. Peter Wang is right to insist that the ideals of justice, sustainability, and peace are intertwined, and that education is the key to advancing these values.

Although they celebrate their ancient birthright and medieval traditions, universities have a vital role to play in meeting the most serious problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their research traditions and resources are indispensable in every area where efforts are being made to meet global challenges. At the same time, the universities are vital centers where future leaders are being developed and where the most important knowledge and values of 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity are being transmitted. It is fitting, therefore, that Peter Wang has developed a special relationship with Tsinghua University, one of the great institutions of higher learning in the world. It was a similar recognition of the importance and power of higher education that led me to establish the James Martin 21<sup>st</sup> Century School at my alma mater, the University of Oxford.

Just as the central problems confronting the planet require interdisciplinary solutions, so also we must recognize the interdependence of all nations and the importance of cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. Peter Wang has been a champion of these values, creating centers in America and abroad to promote amity and collaboration across international borders.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century will be remembered, among other things, as the bloodiest century in human history, at least in the scale of the violence and the sheer number of victims. In the new century, given the deadly nature of new weapons technology and the extreme vulnerability of both the planet and its people, every effort must be made to prevent future wars. Once again, universities have important work to do, both as centers for studying the causes of war and alternatives to violent conflict resolution, and as places where young people can discover the strength and beauty of other cultures, both through their studies and through friendships formed in the international community that is found on the contemporary campus.

It is encouraging to see the growing patterns of cultural and educational exchange between the United States and the People Republic of China. Chinese young people have been studying English for quite some time, but now, increasingly, in schools and on campuses across America, Chinese is being studied by large numbers of students. This is a very good thing for everyone. The future of the planet depends vitally on friendship and cooperation between the Chinese and American people. Clearly, the two nations have much to teach and to learn from each other, and working together they can meet global challenges with combined intellectual force and energy.

I congratulate Peter Wang for his efforts to bring together young people in America and China around a sense of common responsibility for the future of the planet. I hope that many people will read the pages that follow and join me in expressing thanks to Peter for his visionary dedication to those values at the heart of the struggle for the future of the planet: justice, peace, and a sustainable future for all people.