

# **An American Professor Speaks Out On Poverty Alleviation in China**

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*Volume 21, Continuing Education, Tsinghua University*

## **Poverty Alleviation in China -- A Top Priority**

Dr. Peter C. C. Wang is a distinguished member of the Poverty Alleviation team at Tsinghua University in Beijing, China. Professor Wang has had a successful teaching and research career at several well-known American universities and has lived in the United States for nearly 50 years, but his homeland of mainland China has always remained close to his heart. Now in his late sixties, he has become an enthusiastic devotee to the long range planning of poverty alleviation in China through education, and he focuses his attention first on the cultural interchanges between China and the United States. One of Wang's life mottos is "to be the best you can be and to do the most good you can do." He is passionately dedicated to his vision of improved Sino-US relations and calls upon his understanding of both countries in energizing and motivating those around him.

Fifty years ago, Peter C. C. Wang immigrated to the United States. At the time, he was only nineteen years old. As he experienced new and wonderful opportunities, he realized that in order to truly understand another country's culture, a person must live in that country. Today, he is an important and

inspiring figure in improving Sino-US relationships, helping to promote information exchange through public forum and improving educational awareness between the two countries by shuttling between the United States and China and strengthening university collaborations. Wang works hard to devote his expertise in Long Range Strategic Planning to channel resources towards China's Poverty Alleviation educational programs.

Concerning the cause of poverty relief, Wang says, "First, we must have faith. Second, the cause must be fully funded. Third, it takes time." He never lets on that he is already quite prepared in all three aspects. To him, poverty alleviation in China is a life long devotion. "Poverty alleviation should not be used for self-interest or public image building. It requires concrete and consistent efforts. This is not a job that can be completed in a couple of years. It would take eight or even ten years to formulate a workable pilot methodology which, if implemented properly, would enrich the lives of millions, or even hundreds of millions of people."

Because Wang has long established a cooperative relationship with Tsinghua University, he pays tremendous attention to the flagship role that Tsinghua University plays in China's Poverty Alleviation programs, knowing that this leading Chinese university has the greatest potential to influence Poverty Alleviation programs in China.

"Poverty is not a Chinese phenomenon," Wang says. "No country is exempt from it." He noted that even in the United States—the strongest economy in the world—30% of the population is struggling below the poverty line

in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The problem, according to Wang, is the gap between the rich and the poor, rather than poverty itself. “A widening gap is the issue.”

For more than 20 years, Wang did research on science and technology, holding teaching posts at Michigan State University, University of Iowa, Stanford University, and the US Naval Postgraduate School in California. He firmly believes that people who have obtained adequate education themselves have a moral obligation to give back to society and work to narrow the widening gap between rich and poor. As an educator, he cannot turn a blind eye to the needs of China’s current education system.

“Education is the cornerstone of China’s Poverty Alleviation,” he emphasized. “But what most young Chinese people care about is entering a top school. They seldom think about how to help those people who have been left behind.” Current poverty relief activities in China are not fully effective, he thinks, because the services offered don’t last long and people’s understanding of poverty alleviation is still limited. Wang notes that the United States, also, has failed to present a satisfactory result on this front. In America, for example, poverty alleviation can come in the form of food stamps, a monthly pension, or a housing subsidy such as Section 8 for the poor to pay no rent. However, Wang feels strongly that poverty alleviation must be in the form of education rather than financial assistance. “In any country, education must play the key role in poverty alleviation. Even if you feed dinner to the poor, they will still be at the brink of starvation if they don’t know how to cultivate crops and cook rice by themselves.”

Wang's fundamental understanding of how to effectively address poverty alleviation is right in line with two of Tsinghua University's mottos: "Treatment of poverty starts by changing poor people's mentality" and "Poverty Elimination through Education".

### **A Single Spark May Start A Fire**

In 2003, out of the 170,000 American undergraduate students who studied abroad, only 148 of them chose to study in China, according to an official in China's Ministry of Education. In contrast, there were approximately 60,000 Chinese students in the United States. The number of American students currently studying in China is relatively small, and Wang thinks that both language and cultural barriers may help to explain the discrepancy. However, he believes that the limited number of scholarships for overseas study in China is one of the primary reasons for the difference.

With the purpose of encouraging American students to study in China at the forefront of his mind, Wang accepted several invitations to visit China's Ministry of Education, the Sino-US Friendship Association, and the 'China State Council Informatization Office'. He met with several high-ranking government officials, including State Councilor Chen Zili.

A grand vision gradually formed in Wang's mind: to build a bridge sending more American students to live in China, study in China, and actively participate in China's national Poverty Alleviation programs. If thousands of American

students enrolled in China's universities each year, Wang envisions an improved positive influence upon China and Sino-American relationships within a decade.

Wang realizes the current limitations of US-Sino relations, which he hopes to improve on an individual student basis. He knows that the average American knows almost nothing about Chinese people or culture. In particular, older generations of both countries have difficulty understanding each other. "But younger people are just like a blank sheet," says Wang. He feels that young students have a chance to acquire a real picture of China and Chinese society, if given the chance to join the Chinese students doing research and work in China's Poverty Alleviation programs, which involve over 100 'e-learning centers' located all across mainland China. Wang's vision is that "within two decades, these young people will grow to be leaders in business and government officials in the United States, and they will be in a prominent position to enhance the Sino-American friendship and mutual understanding." Wang believes this initiative would produce dynamic influences in many fields.

Having lived in the United States for most of his life, Wang found that the language barrier has been an obstacle for many Chinese friends in achieving further success in American society, even though they are outstanding contributors in their academic fields. A Summer Service Learning Program teams up American students with Chinese students from Tsinghua University, improving the Chinese students' English language skills and the American students' Chinese language skills and, more importantly, provide relationships

and experiences which will provide both sides with a mature social foundation for dealing with future international relations.

Wang decided to found a platform by persuading 53 independent schools to launch summer study overseas programs in China for their students. Independent schools are dedicated to instill in their students a habit of lifetime service rather than an occasional commitment to the society. Wang expects these students will make even more of a difference, compared to their predecessor American students who studied in China simply to land a good job in a multi-national company. The American students will work in rural areas and small towns, giving them the chance to understand China from a comprehensive perspective—its tremendous successes, its social problems, and the roots of these issues and concerns.

Wang never misses a chance to encourage American philanthropists to join Tsinghua University's poverty relief efforts. Wang's blueprint for poverty alleviation in China has attracted interest from officials from the State Department and even the World Bank. Ten prestigious universities in California, a consortium of 1,500 members from top Mexican University *Tecnologico de Monterrey*, and many other higher education sectors have entered into discussions with Wang intending to get involved in Tsinghua University's Poverty Alleviation programs.

Wang's efforts towards poverty alleviation have included programs at other Chinese universities like Sichuan University, Yangzhou Polytechnic College and many Vocational Colleges. "I will offer my help to any university that has

aspirations for poverty alleviation, no matter what strategy they will accordingly engage and work forward,” declared Wang recently.