

Driving the Rockefeller legacy in Asia

Wendy O'Neill, a fifth-generation Rockefeller and chairman of the Asian Cultural Council, speaks about her family's deep appreciation for Asian culture



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OIL tycoon John D Rockefeller Sr (1839-1937) was one of the greatest benefactors to modern medicine in history, giving US\$540 million (in dollar terms of that time) during his lifetime. His son John D Rockefeller Jr pledged around US\$537 million, bringing the total philanthropy of just two generations to over US\$1 billion. Fourth-generation member David Rockefeller is estimated to have given around US\$1 billion already.

But although their name is ubiquitous in the US, the Rockefellers are less well-known for their extensive philanthropy in China, which dates as far back as the mid-19th century.

Back in 1863, then in his early 20s, Mr Rockefeller Sr made what would be the first of many donations to China, according to his great great granddaughter, Wendy O'Neill. "As a family we've always had a deep appreciation for Asian history and culture and a long tradition of giving there," she says, recalling how the tradition has been passed down through the generations.

Ms O'Neill is a fifth-generation member of the Rockefeller family and now, at the age of 52, she dedicates most of her time to grant-giving and grant-sourcing in the East in her role as chairman of the Asian Cultural Council. She recalls how the early ties with the East began with her great great grandfather's fascination with China.

"My great great grandfather John D Rockefeller Sr was an accountant by training and kept record of everything he spent

after getting his first job at age 16. When I was going through his records I found the receipt of his inaugural gift to China when he was 24. He made the donation of US\$10 to a Chinese mission through the Church, as he was a devout Baptist."

"Even before he made a lot of money he wanted to help all mankind, not just those around him," she says. "Philanthropy is part of the Rockefeller DNA and there are more than 10 charities which have been set up by members of the family. We have lots and we want to give more," Ms O'Neill adds.

Today, the Rockefellers are estimated to have donated as much as US\$800 million to China alone, and much more to Asia overall.

Later on as he made more money, says Ms O'Neill, Mr Rockefeller Sr developed his keen sense of giving globally and particularly to Asia. When he became wealthy in the early 20th century, she explains, there was a revolution happening in medicine. "The world of medicine went from being very unscientific to adopting a more European model around the germ theory of disease, which my great great grandfather was a strong proponent of."

China had a long medical tradition, but was in need of modern medicine, she explains, and so around the turn of the century, her great great grandfather commissioned a John Hopkins-type hospital to be constructed in Beijing, called the Peking Union Medical College. "So that was our first philanthropic link to Asia," she explains.

She adds that in the 1920s, her maternal grandmother Abby Rockefeller, journeyed with her parents (Ms O'Neill's great grandparents, Abby and John D Rockefeller Jr) from the US by boat and then train to Beijing for the dedication ceremony of Peking Union Medical College. The buildings remain in central Beijing today and Peking

Union Medical College is still a medical college with a teaching hospital improving medical education in China. "They fell in love with Chinese culture and it really impacted our family," adds Ms O'Neill.

Five generations later, Ms O'Neill is a self-confessed Sinophile and some of her earliest memories are of growing up in a home filled with Asian objets d'art. She studied East Asia at Harvard and later got a Masters in Chinese history from the University of LA, and her first husband was Chinese. She spent three years in Beijing and 12 years in Hong Kong, where she raised her two children.

She has served as a trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund since 2005 and has been a trustee of the China Medical Board since 2008. Last year, she was appointed chairman of the Asian Cultural Council (ACC), a charity which was originally set up in New York by her grandfather John D Rockefeller III, who also founded The Asia Society, a year after she was born.

The ACC, a grant-making and grant-sourcing organisation, works to support international dialogue and mutual understanding between artists based in Asia and the US, through cultural exchanges. Some 50 years later with Ms O'Neill at the helm, it counts over 6,000 Asian and American artists as its beneficiaries, including visual artists Cai Guo-Qiang and contemporary Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. It counts as its supporters Hong Kong luminaries Anson Chan, Gordon and Ivy Wu, and Hans Michael Jepsen. The ACC has donated almost US\$100 million to cultural exchange between Asia and the US.

But despite its



CHARM AND GRACE
Chinese dancer and choreographer Jin Xing performing 'The Closest – The Furthest'

long history, the ACC is not old-fashioned in its outlook. One of its beneficiaries is Jin Xing, a star dancer and choreographer who became the first person to become recognised in China as transgender through an official change on her ID card.

Jin was awarded a fellowship from the ACC Hong Kong office in 1988, and made her first trip to the US on the ACC programme during which she participated in the American Dance Festival. Today, she has her own dance troupe and has achieved huge success in film and television. "We try to do customised programmes for all of our fellows, and it is also about how our network can connect the artist to the right people," explains Ms O'Neill.

When it comes to her family, Ms O'Neill has raised her son and daughter with a keen sense of philanthropic duty. They grew up in Hong Kong and are now aged 20 and 24, both based in Boston. Her son was elected a board member on the Rockefeller family fund in November and her daughter, who is still at Harvard, volunteers teaching immigrants English in Boston's Chinatown.

She taught them to give from the early days. "When they were younger I'd give them HK\$500 (US\$90) before Christmas and tell them: 'Figure out what you're going to give to this year.' It would present them with an opportunity to think philanthropically and they would then give to a recognised charity in Hong Kong. They'd usually choose a project their school was involved with, or an animal charity, something that was close to them."

Ms O'Neill tries to keep a low profile outside of her role as a philanthropist and in her spare time enjoys time with her family at the vacation home in Maine or Florida and loves trips to the theatre. She believes that the fact that she does not bear the eminent surname has been a blessing in some respects.

"I feel in many ways it has been an advantage for me to be born O'Neill, as at first handshake people don't always know who I am. It gives me space, and particularly when I was younger, it means you don't have to have that pressure."

Although Ms O'Neill may not be Rockefeller by name, she is certainly Rockefeller by nature. **W**

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