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Professor Sheds Light on the History of Science

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Professor Zuoyue Wang will give the Lyne Starling Trimble Public Lecture at the American Center for Physics in Maryland on March 23. Photo by Jing Hu.

American-educated Chinese scientists have a long and mostly unknown history of contributions to the United States. History Professor Zuoyue Wang hopes to bring that history out of the shadows.

His receipt of a multi-year \$236,000 grant from the National Science Foundation in 2010 has enabled him to continue and expand his research into the relatively obscure topic.

TAGS

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He has traveled back to mainland China, where he was born, and to Taiwan for research several times, written multiple published articles and will give the Lyne Starling Trimble Public Lecture at the American Center for Physics in Maryland on **March 23.**

“It’s an honor because it’s a named lecture and each quarter, they invite a prominent historian of physics to give it,” Wang says.

His talk, titled “Physicists as Diplomats: U.S.-China Scientific Exchanges from Arms Control to Climate Change,” will focus on an area Wang is all too familiar with – the intersection of science and history.

It’s a meeting point Wang knows all too well because he has lived it.

After earning his undergraduate degree in physics and his master’s in the history of science in China, Wang came to America in 1986 to get a doctorate in history from UC Santa Barbara.

He credits the 5,000 scientists from China who were in America in 1949 with forging a path for his arrival in the United States more than three decades later. Wang’s research looks at those scientists, both the 4,000 who stayed in the United States during the Cold War, despite the anti-Communist sentiment, and the 1,000 who returned home.

He spoke to a couple dozen of those who stayed in America as part of his research.

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“Initially, they were not active in politics because it was risky,” Wang said. “Any Chinese American was viewed with suspicion. But with the civil rights movement, they found their voice and became more politically active.”

In 1957, two American-educated scientists – Tsung-Dao “T.D.” Lee and Chen Ning Yang – won the Nobel Prize in Physics. A third scientist involved in their research, a woman named Chien-Shiung Wu, went on to become the first woman elected president of the American Physical Society in the 1970s.

Many of the 1,000 who returned to China contributed to Chinese science and technology but suffered during the Cultural Revolution until the death of Mao Zedong, chairman of Communist Party of the People’s Republic of China, in 1976. That was when they reconnected with those who had stayed in the U.S., Wang said.

“These scientists helped bring a new crop of Chinese students to the U.S., and I was one of that crop,” he says.

Until recently, around 80 percent of Chinese scientists who came to the United States to study have stayed in America and made contributions, he adds.

“Science is international,” he said. “Science is global. Scientists are working on issues that are really important to the world like climate change.”

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While his grant is finished, Wang continues his research with the help of some of his students.

In addition to several published articles, he has written a chapter titled “Sputnik Moments: Science and Technology Policy from Eisenhower to Obama” in Andrew J. Polsky’s edited book “The Eisenhower Presidency” released in 2015. It is an update of his own 2008 book “In Sputnik’s Shadow: The President’s Science Advisory Committee and Cold War America.” He also is planning a trip to Mexico in May to give lectures and interview some Mexican-Chinese physicists.

“My research, I think it’s very important and on very timely subjects,” Wang says. “One, history should be valuable for its own sake and two, we hope to help society and government make better policy by learning from history.”

About the Author



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Melanie is a communications specialist in the Office of Public Affairs and a Cal Poly Pomona alumna. The areas she writes about include ASI, University Library, CLASS, The Collins College of Hospitality Management, the College of Agriculture, student affairs, foundation, CEU, and events. Her other duties include CyberNews.