Hong Kong’s Tycoon Philanthropist Ronnie Chan

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Hong Kong property tycoon Ronnie Chan’s family made headlines last week for giving $350m (£212m) to Harvard University.

The donation to Harvard, the biggest ever for the university as well as for the Chan family trust, the Morningside Foundation, has generated controversy among Chinese social media users.

Many commentators lambasted the family for giving so much money to an already wealthy institution, rather than to more needy universities in China.

In a recent meeting with journalists, Mr Chan, the chairman of family firm Hang Lung Group, brushed off the criticism.

“To be honest, we donate to projects that we think are meaningful. How society views it or how we are viewed by history, well, we’ll let them decide. How others view us is out of our control,” he said.

Mr Chan’s not stopping at Harvard. He is also making another donation, this time to the tune of $20m, to the University of Southern California, where he received a master’s degree in business administration in 1976.

“The Harvard donation comes from the Chan family trust, which has a much bigger capacity,” he said. “[This one] is from my wife and me and so is much smaller in size but not in sincerity.”

The donation will support the university’s
occupational therapy programme and will also endow a professorship in the name of Mr Chan’s mother, a former nurse.

‘Philanthropy’

Ronnie Chan is the son of Chan Tseng-Hsi, who founded Hang Lung in 1960 and for whom Harvard’s School of Public Health will be renamed.

Hang Lung is one of Hong Kong’s largest property developers. Since the early 1990s, the company has expanded aggressively into mainland China under the younger Mr Chan, a devout Christian.

He said the Morningside Foundation, funded by the family fortune, has endowed several professorships at universities in China, Hong Kong and America.

Since 1996, it has also offered financial support to about 500 needy students each year at China’s top universities.

“All the family money is for philanthropy, except for living expenses for my mother. She is 94 and isn’t a big spender,” Mr Chan said.

Mr Chan and his younger brother Gerald, who attended Harvard, are currently worth about $3.2bn, according to an estimate by Forbes magazine, which ranked them as the 17th wealthiest people in Hong Kong.

Given the family commitment to philanthropy, it was surprising to hear Mr Chan criticise Bill Gates and Warren Buffett for their recent attempts to ask Chinese entrepreneurs to do more.

“I say it was shameful,” he said. “They didn’t do their market research.”

Mr Chan said that given the relative youth of the modern Chinese economy, significant numbers of Chinese companies and business people were already committed to philanthropy.

“This is unprecedented in the world, I think,” he said. “(Gates and Buffett) shouldn’t have been lecturing to them.”

In judging the state of philanthropy in China, he said, the willingness of the country’s new rich to donate should be balanced against the difficulty of doing charity work there.
The Chan family has been giving to charities in mainland China, where the family originated, for almost 20 years.

“If you donate to the mainland, it’s not as simple as giving money. You need a lot of psychological resilience,” Mr Chan said.

“If you donate overseas, it’s a simple matter. In mainland China, there are so many headaches.”

He declined to elaborate on what those problems were. But his experience working with the Forbidden City in Beijing sheds some light.

Mr Chan was founding chairman of the China Heritage Fund, which sought to restore buildings, the Palace of Established Happiness and the Hall of Rectitude, within the former imperial palace.

He said the fund had received global acclaim for its work but admitted that after the fund left, there were certain “complications”.

“I thought they’d made a mess of the interior after we left. It was changed [so it looked like] a five-star hotel. The world has so many five-star hotels. Why would you make the inside of the Forbidden City look like that?” he said.

He was disappointed by the experience but has not let it put him off other charity work in China.

“We renovated the buildings. But what other people do after that, I have no control over. There is no point getting upset about it.”