

Whoa Nelly!

As a child in Hong Kong, Nelly Ng accompanied her pediatrician father on after-hours house calls to children who lived in slums.

"We rode in comfort in a car and arrived in these areas where many people were crammed into small quarters and children had to run out of the house to get water," recalls Ng, a family physician with a busy practice in Scarborough, Ont. "These were children like me, but I didn't have to worry about necessities. As a child, you wonder about this unfairness."

Ng, 49, says her father was her role model and went out of his way to help impoverished patients, a "vivid life lesson" that Ng learned well. Since graduating from McMaster medical school in Hamilton in 1978, she has thrown herself into charitable activities — sitting on boards and raising money for organizations like Scarborough's Grace and General hospitals and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

Eight years ago, she established her own philanthropic foundation, a move inspired by her first trip to China. Her parents had fled the Communist regime in China for Hong Kong before Ng was born, and her visit was planned as a respite from her hectic life, a quiet holiday with her husband. After visiting a museum, she was "literally struck in awe to see the magnificent treasures, household items created more than 2500 years ago. These were not just artifacts, they reflected man's wisdom and ingenuity." But the items that so impressed her were at risk — museum preservation techniques were not advanced in China, nor was conservation a priority in the rapidly developing country.

On her way home to Canada, she began to wonder how she could help. "Canada is not an old country," she mused, "but we are blessed with technology."

She decided to enlist the help of Martin O'Connell, a former federal cabinet minister with whom she had worked in an outreach program at the Grace Hospital in the 1970s, when he was a member of Parliament. "She phoned me one day after I'd retired and said she had a favour to ask," recalls O'Connell, who is now 85.

The next thing he knew he was cochair, with Ng, of the Canadian Foundation for the Preservation of Chinese Cultural and Historical Treasures. "The subject matter interested me, as it did [Ng]," says O'Connell, who was instrumental in

establishing diplomatic relations between Canada and China.

"I knew I could play a role, introducing her to the government of Canada and helping her learn how to approach potential financial supporters," he said. "We made a lot of contacts."

As its most recent endeavour, the foundation, which is funded with \$1.8-million in donations and pledges, has taken advanced imaging technology developed by the National Research Council to the site of the massive Three Gorges dam on the Yangtze river. The dam, scheduled to be completed in

2003, will flood 80 000 hectares of land and displace 1.5 million people. The Zhang Fei Temple, which is in the flood path, has to be moved and re-assembled. To aid this effort, Ng's foundation is donating advanced scanning equipment. The technology allows for ancient pieces of art to be captured in 3-D, with the information digitized.

"For archival purposes, this creates a permanent record," explains Ng. If an item is damaged in the move the 3-D digital image can guide the restoration. The scanning technology will also allow for a "virtual" preservation of some other treasures, including 3000 years of records of flood and drought carved into the earth, which will be lost forever because of the dam.

As well as bringing Canadian technology to China, the foundation has brought China to Canada, sponsoring 2 major exhibition tours here — *Masterpieces of 20th-Century Chinese Painting* and *Jade, the Ultimate Treasure of Ancient China* (see *CMAJ* 2001;165(4):456-7).

"It dawned on me that if we are setting programs to help conserve Chinese art, we should bring some of it here for people to see," says Ng. "More than 150 000 people saw the painting exhibit while it was here."

Both Ng and O'Connell, who has retired from active duty and is now an emeritus founding cochair, like to think the foundation is also providing a role model in China, where nongovernmental organizations are rare.

Ng devotes every Wednesday to her charitable activities, but makes up for it the rest of the week, employing 2 shifts of office staff as she works her long days as a family physician. About half her patients are of Chinese origin — she speaks both Mandarin and Cantonese — with many of the rest being immigrants who must bring English-speaking relatives to translate for them. "They know that I have the patience," says Ng. — *Ann Silversides*, Toronto



Dr. Nelly Ng: preserving China's history