

Panda Lecture: Tamkang University Department of History Hosts  
Panda Lecture Featuring Sir David Nicholas Cannadine on  
Philanthropy, Charity, and the Public Good

Campus focus

The Department of History under the College of Liberal Arts at Tamkang University hosted two Panda Lectures on May 28 in the Chang Yeo Lan Hall of the Hsu Shou–Chlien International Conference Center. The first lecture, held at 10:00 a.m., featured the distinguished British historian Professor Sir David Nicholas Cannadine, who was knighted by the British Crown. His talk, titled “Philanthropy in the Modern World,” attracted nearly 300 attendees, including faculty and students from Tamkang University, researchers from Academia Sinica, and scholars and students from universities such as National Taiwan University and National Chengchi University.

Academic Vice President Hui–Huang Hsu welcomed Sir David Cannadine and Dame Linda Colley as featured speakers of the Panda Lecture series. He introduced Sir David Cannadine as a former President of the British Academy and currently a Dodge Professor of History Emeritus at Princeton University, noting that he was knighted in recognition of his outstanding contributions to historical scholarship and the humanities. Hsu also explained the origins and mission of the Panda Lecture series, emphasizing its role in promoting high–level international academic exchange and inspiring students and faculty through dialogue with world–renowned scholars.

At the outset of his lecture, Sir David Cannadine praised Taiwan’s recent achievements in philanthropy and charitable giving. He specifically highlighted the Hsu Shou–Chlien International Conference Center, noting that it was funded through a donation from Hang–Chien Hsu, an alumnus of Tamkang University’s Graduate Institute of Management Sciences. According to Cannadine, this serves as a strong example of the close relationship between higher education and private philanthropy in Taiwan.

Sir David Cannadine then guided the audience through the historical origins of modern philanthropy. He argued that “giving for the public good” is far from a modern invention, tracing its roots from the gifts of the Three Wise Men in the Bible to the 16th-century donation by Thomas Bodley that established the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford. Philanthropy, he suggested, is as old as civilization itself. However, philanthropy became increasingly institutionalized during the 20th century, largely due to the emergence of industrial fortunes in the United States. Cannadine discussed figures such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, highlighting Carnegie’s famous statement that “the man who dies rich dies disgraced.” This philosophy, he explained, encapsulates the modern idea that wealth is not merely private property but also carries a public responsibility.

The establishment of major foundations by Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Ford profoundly influenced the development of universities, hospitals, and cultural institutions around the world. Yet Cannadine emphasized that the history of philanthropy is not simply a history of benevolence. The fortunes that enabled many philanthropic endeavors were often accumulated amid labor exploitation or colonial expansion. Philanthropy may generate public benefits, but it also reflects underlying inequalities of wealth and power.

Turning to the 21st century, Cannadine examined the rise of “philanthrocapitalism,” a model driven by the technology sector that emphasizes managerial efficiency and measurable outcomes. He cited Bill Gates and Warren Buffett as leading examples. At the same time, he noted continuing debates over whether ultra-wealthy donors exert excessive influence on public policy and whether universities and cultural institutions face ethical dilemmas in accepting donations. As examples, he pointed to cases in which Yale University returned a donation after a donor attempted to influence faculty appointments, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art removed the Sackler family name from its facilities due to the family’s association with the opioid crisis. Such examples demonstrate, he argued, that modern institutions cannot simply ask whether funding is

available they must also consider where the money comes from.

Sir David Cannadine concluded by quoting the British thinker R. H. Tawney:

“What the rich call the problem of poverty, the poor call the problem of wealth.” He stressed that philanthropy both reflects economic inequality and provides opportunities for the wealthy to fulfill social responsibilities. He encouraged students to consider how they might give back to society and their alma mater in ways that promote the public good should they achieve success and wealth in the future.

The Q&A session was jointly moderated by Sir David Cannadine, Dr. Kuo-Tung Chen, adjunct research fellow from the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica, Chair Chi-Lin Lee, and Assistant Professor Yu-Lu Tsai of the Department of History. Numerous audience members participated, creating a lively and engaging discussion.

Associate Research Fellow Ku-Ming Chang from the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica shared that Sir David Cannadine’s observation particularly struck him: that while large foundations can alleviate social problems through philanthropy and grants, they may also reinforce inequality by concentrating resources in elite universities and major institutions. He suggested that this perspective merits further reflection in Taiwan.

Research Fellow Shang-Jen Li from the Institute of History and Philology at Academia Sinica commented that Sir David Cannadine’s discussion of philanthropy, from 20th-century industrial foundations to the charitable models of today’s technology billionaires, provided a broad and historically grounded perspective. He was especially interested in the growing trend among newer foundations to deploy their resources actively during the founders’ lifetimes rather than preserving them indefinitely, viewing this as a development worthy of continued observation.





Fellow of the British Academy, FBA  
Knight Bachelor





