Remarks for UC Tree-Planting, May 24, 2013

WENDY YIP (Revised):

Thank you Beth.

What an honour it is to be here with you all to celebrate Asian and Pacific American Heritage Month. When I started spreading the word about this idea, I had no idea that the response would be so enthusiastic.

- I think it strikes a chord with our Asian and Pacific American community, not only because we are moved by nature and beauty, but because of our own experience, or parents’ or grand-parents’ experiences as immigrants and Asian Americans.

- Like the many immigrant groups who have come to the United States...from Irish...to German...to the slaves brought here involuntarily...Asians have faced discrimination and barriers.

- Since the Asian community’s arrival in the Midwest and Cincinnati and its growth is relatively recent, we tend to forget that Asians have had a presence since the earliest days of this country, and in fact helped to build some of America’s institutions, like the Transcontinental Railway, and California’s agricultural economy, all in the 19th century.

- Chinese workers were among the first Asian Americans to come to this country as gold prospectors and railroad construction workers. When discriminatory legislation barred them from those occupations, they moved into farming, and when barred by the government from owning land, moved into to factory jobs as well.

- **Japanese, Asian Indian, and Filipino** immigrants also came to work as farmers and labourers in the US and Hawaii in the 19th and early 20th centuries. When exploitative employers tried to pit different immigrant groups against each other in
Hawaiian sugarcane plantations, **Japanese and Filipino** immigrants and native-born citizens **worked together to bring about better working conditions for all.**

- Discriminatory practices extended even to our government. At various times, Congress worked to decrease or even reverse the numbers of Asians settling down in the US, as we were perceived as “the yellow peril”. **Immigration quotas were set based on race and ethnicity.** A whole series of laws and treaties were drafted to **specifically exclude Asians** from immigrating to the US. They include the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907 with Japan, the Act of 1917 with its Asiatic Barred Zone, and the National Origins and Asian Exclusion Acts of 1924. The latter were intended “to preserve the ideal of American homogeneity.” It was not until the **Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965** that race and ethnicity quotas were abolished. This history explains why Asian and Pacific Americans have been a smaller part of the US population until recently.

*ad libbed at ceremony:* The influx of Asian immigrants to the Tri-State area has been more recent. Many contribute here at UC, as educators, professors, researchers, health care providers, etc. Many contribute in high-tech arenas, such as in Internet-related technologies. How fitting that Asian / Pacific Americans can now contribute in areas and ways that can lead to more open communications and a more open society.]

- Even Asians who had already legally entered and settled in the US prior to the severe immigration restrictions, suffered discrimination. Laws **prohibited land ownership by Asians,** and even marriage **between Asian and white Americans.** The US government in some cases even **revoked the US citizenship** of naturalized Asian-Americans, purely on the basis of their race.

- Another dark moment in this nation’s history occurred during World War II. 120,000 Japanese Americans – most of them U.S. citizens and most living on the West Coast – were forced to evacuate to rough ‘internment camps’ in Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado and Wyoming, where they survived harsh conditions. Despite this injustice, some Japanese Americans showed their patriotism by volunteering to serve in the US army. They formed most of the **442nd Regimental Combat Team,** which saw action in the European theatre. They followed their motto, “**Go for**
broke”, and became the most decorated infantry regiment in the history of the US Army. UC Professor Emeritus Roger Daniels is a well-known authority on this topic. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the resettlement to Cincinnati, of some of those Japanese American internees. Some those internees were able to attend UC, and some are still living today in the Tri-state area. So it seemed timely to commemorate this event as well, during Asian and Pacific American Heritage month.

- Today, a coalition of individuals and Asian American organizations have come together to donate these trees as a reminder of the discrimination and barriers that Asian and Pacific Americans and all immigrants have encountered. At the same, these trees help us to celebrate the contributions of Asian Americans to the fabric of our nation, and our becoming part of mainstream America.

- In addition, the tree project connects us with our UC heritage: UC alumnus and U.S. President William Howard Taft. It was his wife Helen -- the first lady of the nation -- who helped to facilitate Japan’s gift of cherry blossom trees to the United States, and joined the Japanese ambassador’s wife more than 100 years ago to plant the first trees in Washington DC. In return, the US later gifted American dogwoods to Japan.

- So it seemed very fitting to choose those trees to further beautify UC’s campus during Asian and Pacific American month. Len Thomas also suggested the Bloodgood maple, whose lovely crimson leaves evokes UC’s colours. He learned that the Japanese sometimes call maples “momiji”, meaning “becoming crimson-leaved” or “baby’s pretty little hands”, and have a tradition of passing a baby through its leaves as a blessing.

- How appropriate, then, that we plant this tree of blessing at a main entrance to UC. We hope that it will bless every student who passes through the hands of UC faculty, staff, and other students. May they gain wisdom and insight, along with the knowledge taught to them here at UC. May they appreciate their own heritage and learn to respect the heritage of their fellow Bearcats.
• And now I want to acknowledge all of the groups and individuals who have given or pledged to this UC tree project:

• The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL)
• The UC Chapter of the Society of Chinese-American Professors (SOCAPS, organized by Mei Tang of Education & Ming Tan of DAAP)
• Japan America Society of Greater Cincinnati (whose members donated the cherry trees at Ault Park, the source of my inspiration)
• Greater Cincinnati Chinese Music Society Board (connected by Xiaolan Cui)
• Cincinnati Korean American Association (connected by Injoo Kim of DAAP)
• Interim Dean Teik Lim and his wife
• Xuemao Wang and his wife
• Raj Mehta, Vice Provost for International Affairs, who is also working with Asian Indian groups such as Ankur Gajarati and Triveni Mitra Mandal to raise additional funds
• And Palavi Patel, a UC staff member
• I also thank Ratee Apana for helping me to organize the multi-cultural refreshments that will be served, and especially, Marianne Kunnen-Jones, Beth McGrew, and Len Thomas for their hard work toward bringing this project to fruition.

• I have been deeply touched by the strong show of support and I want to thank you all for your willingness to give something back to the University of Cincinnati.

• Now, I’d like to introduce my spouse and UC’s 28th President....Santa Ono, who will receive the trees on behalf of UC.

Some useful sites about Asian / Pacific American Heritage month and history:

http://asianpacificheritage.gov/
http://www.apiaheritagesf.org/history.shtml
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asian_American_history
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asian_American