A Pasadena businessman has donated $35 million to the University of Southern California's engineering department, saying he's become wealthier than he ever imagined possible and wants to help others at his alma mater.

Ming Hsieh, 50, earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in electrical engineering from USC after spending his youth on a rice farm in China during the Cultural Revolution.

He became a billionaire when the fingerprint identification technology company he formed, Cogent Inc., went public in 2004.

USC "definitely helped me reach the American dream," Hsieh said at ceremony on campus Monday. "I want to help SC educate others, to let them build their dreams."

The donation is part of a $300 million fundraising campaign by USC's engineering school intended to propel it to the top tier of engineering schools, with such institutions as Caltech, MIT, Stanford and UC Berkeley.

USC President Steven B. Sample said Hsieh's gift "adds luster to a department that is already highly distinguished."

Hsieh's interest in electronics began during the Cultural Revolution, when his family lacked electricity. Hsieh's father had been an electrical engineer for the power authority and his mother was a high school literature teacher.
After Hsieh's father persuaded authorities to permit him to work on bringing electricity to their village, Hsieh helped his father erect makeshift utility poles. Hsieh then began to tinker with simple radios and built amplifiers for fun.