
As I consider this theme or working title and reflect on the time lines, I think one could consider – in the first overview, the time line starting from 1819 ie the founding of modern Singapore – or one could look at the time line from 1965, which is the birth of the nation of Singapore today. Both I believe draw some helpful insights given the needs of the day or era and also the motivation behind or underlying these initiatives. By the time we look at 1965 onward we see already in place existing practices in philanthropy and the presence of several substantial foundations – but perhaps behind a growing backdrop (essentially reflection of government policy) of ensuring that a dependence mindset is not nurtured or encouraged for example. The basic provisions of modern housing, improved healthcare and education for all, in the past decades, have also enabled the philanthropic dollar to be reassigned to other areas not covered by government funded services. Tonight I will take the longer time span (1800s and 1900s) for brief overview.

All of us at the conference today will have been filled to capacity by the content and information that has already been presented on day one. It would be cruel for me to add much more content tonight – rather tonight I suggest we will go heavy on food and conversation supplemented by perhaps some helpful mild stimulant – some sparkling white wine or some red wine.

Let me begin my brief sharing with a few insights I have gathered from doing some ‘homework’. I use this term rather than ‘research’ to keep it in lay language and not academic language and also just in case I may be including some sources such as personal oral records – often termed ‘hear say’.
Records of philanthropic endeavours going back to the 1800s – cite education and health as two key areas for support. One Singapore school St Margaret’s is celebrating 170 years this year, another St Andrew’s is celebrating 150 years this year. I use these purely to illustrate the long and rich history behind several schools and the part played by early philanthropists in bringing education to the reach of the community – rather than just private home tutoring which was probably only an option if one were in the more well to do sectors of the community.

In the area of healthcare the development of our services progressed alongside medical advancement and availability of suitably trained personnel. Here for example there were efforts to improve infant mortality rates ‘among the coolie classes’ (late 1800 early 1900) by better training of midwives and also focus on better treatment and prevention of some of the more challenging diseases of the day (polio, TB etc). Early philanthropists came alongside such initiatives by way of sizeable donations towards such causes. A case in point would the Tan Tock Seng Hospital founded and funded by philanthropist Tan Tock Seng.

Last week at the ACSEP Advisory Board meeting we touched on the role of women in the area of Philanthropy. This topic is now a study by the Indiana University Centre on Philanthropy – soon be called School of Philanthropy. I gave this some thought – and then decided to do some extra homework on this in the case of Singapore to perhaps encourage this as a third area of early initiatives for dinner discussion.

In 1915, 23 ladies came together to form the Chinese Ladies Association – in the inaugural group photo you will see the wife of the then Chinese Consul General, (Mrs Hoo Wei Yin) and also Singapore’s first woman doctor (Dr Lee Choo Neo). Mrs Lee Choon Guan was the founding President and provided one of her properties ‘Magenta Cottage’ as the meeting place. Many of the ladies were the wives of successful business persons in the community. I wonder if these ladies got together to decide on this philanthropic pursuit so that at least the money belonging to their husbands would not go into philandering pursuits? (Concubines were quite common amongst the well to do in those
days). Can anyone guess what was one of the first fundraising projects these ladies undertook?

This organisation (now named Chinese Women’s Association) will celebrate 100 years of charitable pursuits shortly. Many of the past Presidents read like a who’s who in Singapore. In the 50’s we had Mrs Tan Chin Tuan (Tan Foundation) and Mrs Loke Yew (Cathay Organisation) and more recently Ms Lee Siok Tin (Lee Foundation). Today the CWA is ably headed by Mrs Betty Chen. A book commemorating the Centenary is being published – for those from outside Singapore I would like to send you a copy when this is launched in late 2013.

The fourth area that I believe has strong roots is in religious giving. Being a trading community different races descended on Singapore. Some early philanthropists who gave toward the establishment of religious institutions were Sir Manasseh Meyer to the Jewish community and Naraina Pillai toward the Hindu community (Indian). Several Chinese groups also gave toward religious purposes – such as Ngee Ann Kongsi in the 1800s. The Christian community benefitted from access to land – but you can find plaques in some early churches acknowledge the gifts of members – for gifts toward building and service to the church.

Allow me to briefly mention some ways that philanthropy has evolved today in these four areas of early initiatives.

Education – there still remains strong support for the field of education amongst philanthropists, established foundations and the emergence of the alumni as an additional group of donors. Our government provides significant capital funding toward education – but schools need to raise funds for the extras. (Until recently these ‘extras’ included sports facilities such as swimming pool, or performing arts centres.) There has also been a significant swing to funding of universities – with new sources of funding coming from many of today’s successful business men and women. (Consider also Ngee Ann Polytechnic funded by the Chinese Teochew clan association).
Health and Community Services – another area our government has raised standards extensively and for all. However there has still been a place for the substantial philanthropist as demonstrated by the 2 new general hospitals – Khoo Teck Puat and Ng Teng Fong Hospitals – the respective families each donating $125 million. This would suggest that the government is still looking to the private sector for financial partnership in this area. For Community Services we have the pretty well supported Community Chest raising tens of millions yearly and the President’s Charity – money comes from a wide group of donors including corporations, foundations and individuals.

Women in Philanthropy – I guess there are a couple of no brainers that I should mention. One is that you need to have (some) money before you can give it away. Early philanthropists made the money mostly through hard work and good business sense. Today you can make good money in business and also in the professions (one could include holding key political office or key government office amongst top earners in Singapore). Women continue to play an active role in philanthropy today in Singapore. Some are giving away money earned in the past (such as family foundations) and others money that they have personally earned and yet others in efforts in raising funds and running charities.

Religious giving accounts for a significant portion of documented charitable giving today in Singapore. It needs to be noted that religious giving in almost all instances has no tax offsetting. Therefore an intriguing recent development is the amounts that 2 mega churches have undertaken to raise from their members (in both churches numbering about 25,000). Both are raising hundreds of millions of dollars to fund new properties. I see this as a clear demonstration of the power of grassroots giving or grassroots philanthropy. The other areas that increasingly demonstrates the power of grassroots philanthropy is responding to appeals following natural calamities (2004 Tsunami, 2008 Cyclone Nargis and even the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami), hardship cases (foreign workers killed or badly injured on the job) and the recent years’ television charity appeals as examples.

Finally, what could this mean for us looking ahead?
Just a few observations here to conclude.

To the man in the street there remains a clear expectation that government should take care of mostly everything considered basic. Housing, public transport, affordable healthcare, basic education are some key expectations. Gaps will always exist – some may be for small numbers of people or for certain needs that fall outside the broad based sectors.

Philanthropic giving has been moving outside Singapore as primary needs have largely been met by public sector services. Lien Foundation has started working in Cambodia and Vietnam for several years. Doctors have been going to many Asian countries to provide treatment or to impart training. Many individuals and small groups are also quietly going to the countries around and have started a whole variety of initiatives in the last 20 years.

There is clear potential to develop the area of grassroots philanthropy. Our income levels are reasonably high and there seems to be an openness to giving back in some way – there is no need for minimum amounts – essentially whatever comfortably relates to your income level.

I said earlier there were a couple of no brainers – this is the other one I have discovered more recently. Just because you have (large amounts of) money does not mean that you will be generous and give it away (to a need). Having said that, thankfully there are so many gathered here for the summit who have and continue to be models for generosity.

I hope everyone will enjoy the evening, Swee Sum will talk a bit on ACSEP mid way, and wishing everyone success in your philanthropic endeavours.