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ASIAN-AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY: EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE, INCREASING POSSIBILITIES

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Introduction

Much has been written in recent years about the emergence of a ‘new golden age of philanthropy’ that is similar to the time 100 years ago when titans of business such as Rockefeller and Carnegie created their own foundations. The number of foundations in the United States has grown from 22,000 in the early 1980s to over 65,000 today. (Economist, 2004) Amidst the boom in the number of foundations and assets in foundations, the issue of diversity in philanthropy has had a significant amount of attention. Much has been written about how diversity is (or isn’t) a factor in giving, how ethnic and racial groups exhibit different styles of philanthropy, and how the grantmaking community is (or isn’t) doing more to reach out to minority communities. In spite of the emergence of a ‘new golden age of philanthropy’, not much attention has been paid to philanthropy and giving among Asians or the Asian-American population, and much less specifically to Chinese and Chinese-Americans. The Asian-American population has grown tremendously since the 1960s and is becoming a greater influence of mainstream American life in fields such as medicine, business, and technology. Along with the increase in influence has been an increase in wealth among Asian-Americans. As this trend continues, we need answers for questions about how Asian-Americans can engage in more philanthropy, and how the changing identity of Asian-Americans shapes the attitudes about philanthropy and giving. The related questions are:

- From previous studies, we see definitive patterns of giving by Asians. Do these patterns change with each succeeding generation growing up in America?
- What are the differences between philanthropy in Asia and philanthropy by Asian-Americans?
- What are nonprofits involved with Asian-Americans doing now?
- What is being done now to encourage greater philanthropy in the Asian community?
- What are Asian-Americans’ motivations for philanthropy?

This paper will not answer all of these questions, but rather the paper serves as an introduction into these questions and provides a framework for future research that is needed to address these questions comprehensively. For this paper, I focus specifically on the Chinese-American population, since the Chinese are the single largest ethnic group among Asians in the United States.¹ With further research, it may be possible to extrapolate the findings in this paper to other Asian populations as well.² The purpose of this paper is to report on what I have researched on Chinese-American philanthropy and to propose an outline for future research on Chinese-American philanthropy. By expanding the philanthropic sector’s knowledge about Chinese-Americans and their philanthropy, the overall nonprofit sector will increase its possibilities for effectively advocating for and providing services needed by all of society.

¹ Chinese-Americans are about 25% of the Asian-American population with about 2.8 million Chinese. Source: 2000 Census data.

² Succeeding papers will pursue these questions more in-depth through surveys and interviews of Asian-American philanthropists.

Historical context of giving in China

Philanthropy has been highly regarded in Chinese civilization from the earliest days and has a long-standing tradition in China. Although the Chinese have no word that expresses our western concept of philanthropy, the concept is hardly unfamiliar. (Wong 21) Other concepts we have, however, are not alien to the Chinese tradition, such as altruism, civic betterment, benevolence, and charity. It is these different types of generosity that historically have been referred to as 'philanthropy' in Chinese society. The phrase used in Chinese to refer to philanthropy is translated literally as 'compassionate good work', which does not quite capture philanthropy as a western society definition of 'love of mankind'. Western philanthropy is exhibited mainly through giving towards institutions to solve root problems of society. Philanthropy, as defined and practiced by the Chinese, is mainly giving on an individual basis, which includes charity, mutual aid, and giving to one's family and community.

Philosophers Confucius and Mencius regarded philanthropy as "the distinguishing characteristic of man, as one of the fundamental constituents of nobleness and superiority of character". (Yue 16) Teachings from Buddhism and Confucianism have played a large role in the influence of developing altruism in a person's character, often unbeknownst to the Chinese person, because those teachings are so rooted in Chinese culture. As Stella Shao put it, "For example, from Buddha we have learned the value of compassion and service to others; from Confucius we have understood the concepts of "benevolence" and "filial piety" and the importance of rituals in human affairs; from Lao Tzu through the Tao Teh Chin, we have acquired the perception of the "relatedness of all things," the cyclical nature of change and the reciprocity that characterizes all human relationships." (Shao 56)

Chinese pooled their monies together in villages to enable the citizens of the village to attend school or to buy new oxen to plow the land. Philanthropy also originated with the dynastic rulers as a function of the state, as imperial paternalism flowing downwards to benefit the people, while practically nothing is said of initiative and practice in philanthropy on the part of the people themselves. (Yue 22) "If scholars noticed Chinese acts of benevolence at all, they dismissed them. Chinese benevolence, they thought, served the self-interest of the elite, lacked piety, and was not altogether voluntary." (Ilchman 133)

Chinese philanthropy can be divided into 3 groups:

- Charity: disinterested aid to the poor
- Mutual Benefit: relief and protection by reciprocal efforts
- Civic Betterment: promotion of public welfare through voluntary cooperation on the part of the inhabitants. (Yue)

Chinese understand the value of mutuality in philanthropy, and this is something that cannot be underestimated. (Yue 75) Instead of an individualistic culture, the Chinese have a culture that looks out for the family, the clan, the community, and the village. Hence, philanthropy is perceived as a strong notion of helping others in the form of giving goods, time, skills, and money. (Chao 11) In the late 19th century, philanthropic efforts led to free schools and public

lectures, similar to what we can still identify with today. Other uses of philanthropy are not so common today, such as funding for literary censorship, or funding the building of lights and bridges, and providing free ferry services. (Yue 106) Indeed even by the 1900s, one author opined, “Chinese philanthropy has reached the stage of systemization and institutionalism, of adequate relief, but not of scientific prevention of destitution.” (Yue 43) One hundred years later, the development of the philanthropic spirit among the Chinese is still a work in progress. For those that have immigrated to the United States to become Chinese-Americans, the philanthropic potential has never been greater.

The Chinese-American Population: the Philanthropic Potential

Long stereotyped as frugal, stingy, and entrepreneurial, Chinese have not been thought of as generous and giving people, much less philanthropists engaged in solving societal problems. Yet what we are seeing is increasing philanthropic potential, as wealth among Chinese in the United States and in Greater China blossoms.³

The earliest Chinese immigrants to the United States started coming about the time of the Gold Rush in the 1840s, when Chinese in Guangdong and Shanghai began hearing rumors about the ‘gold mountain’. Chinese came to seek fortunes in the gold rush, but many never made the riches that they heard about. More Chinese came to build the railroads in the 1880s, and most Chinese stayed put in America and made their livelihood in the United States. Many lived below the poverty line and were trapped in urban ghettos. Chinatowns sprouted up in cities such as San Francisco and New York City, with most Chinese working in restaurants, dry cleaners, or the garment industry. Many children of these first-generation immigrants subsequently got jobs as scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs and civil workers, and started their own families in the United States. It wasn’t until the 1960s that large numbers of Chinese immigrated to America to pursue college and graduate educations, as a direct result of loosened immigration policies. In turn the children of these immigrants also got college educations and moved into professional positions as well. Today, the number of Chinese-Americans who have finished college is nearly double that of the general population.⁴ Almost 50% of Asians have a college degree or higher, compared with 27% for the overall population. (Stoops 3)

Along with high educational attainment is the tremendous increase in affluence among Chinese-Americans, and more broadly Asian-Americans. In 2004, Asian-Americans account for 5% of affluent households in the United States, which is up from 1% in 2002.⁵ (Frank 2004) Of these Asian-Americans, their average net worth was \$2.9 million. Most earned their wealth recently, with very few acquiring their money through inheritance. (Frank 2004)

Combined with increasing wealth has been an extensive growth in the population. The Chinese-American population has grown from 237,292 in 1960 to 2,879,636 in 2000.⁶ Much of this tremendous growth is due to immigration from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Of the 2.8 million, just 52.9% were born in the United States. According to the U.S. Immigration and

³ Greater China refers to China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

⁴ Diaspora Philanthropy: Perspectives on India and China. Page 9.

⁵ “Affluent” is defined as households with more than \$500,000 in investible assets.

⁶ Figure includes the Taiwanese population and some 447,051 mixed-race persons.

Naturalization Service (INS), 1,465,117 immigrants were admitted to the United States from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as permanent residents between 1961 and 1998—nearly half of them between 1991 and 1998 alone. (Lai 37-38)

The broader Asian-American population has also experienced intense population growth over the past 10 years. In 1990 the total Asian-American population was 7.7 million; in 2000 this figure had grown to 12.3 million, representing a 69% increase. This is largely attributed to an increase in immigrant populations, as well as children being born in the United States to immigrant parents.⁷ The 12.3 million represent about 4.2 percent of the total U.S. population. (2000 Census) A majority of Asian-Americans live in major metropolitan areas, a result of greater job opportunities and also higher percentages of immigrant populations in large metropolitan areas.

Chinese-Americans are no exception within the larger Asian-American population. The San Francisco Bay Area has the highest number of Chinese, with approximately 490,000 Chinese. In second place is the Los Angeles metro area, with approximately 400,000, and third place is the New York City metro area, with roughly 390,000 Chinese. In the Washington, DC metro area, the figure is approximately 70,000 Chinese, which is a 42% increase from the Chinese population in Washington in 1990.⁸ Combined, these four metropolitan areas represent about 50% of the Chinese-American population. Much of the growth is taking place not in Chinatowns or city centers; rather the growth is coming in the suburbs of major cities. About 50% of all Chinese-Americans now live in the suburbs. For example, in Washington, DC, the population is even more dispersed. Almost 89% of Chinese live in the suburbs and just 11% live in Washington, DC city center.⁹ The combination of a growing Chinese population, high levels of income and education, and strong local economies bode well for continuing growth in these four cities. Future research into the Chinese populations of these four major metropolitan areas needs to explore in detail the ties of Chinese culture on wealth and attitudes about philanthropy and charity.

Chinese in Greater China also have levels of wealth that cannot be ignored. On the other side of the Pacific, an estimated 281,000 individuals based in Hong Kong or China were identified as high net worth individuals in 2003, those with US\$1 million or more in financial asset wealth.¹⁰ (World Wealth Report, 2004) This is a subset of the larger high net-worth Asian population with combined assets of US\$6.5 trillion. This is forecast to grow to US\$9 trillion by 2008, with the expected continued growth of the Chinese economy.¹¹ (World Wealth Report, 2004) It is unknowable whether these 281,000 Chinese will eventually immigrate to the United States and contribute to American society, but the amounts of wealth does exhibit the level of philanthropic potential that overseas Chinese have.¹² Of course, it is not safe to assume that all of this wealth will transfer to the United States through immigration. Nevertheless, the possibilities of philanthropy by Chinese around the world merits attention by the philanthropic sector and

⁷ "From Many Shores: Asians in Census 2000". A Report by the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, University at Albany, October 6, 2001.

⁸ Figures from the Lewis Mumford Center, <http://mumford1.dyndns.org/cen2000/>.

⁹ Figures from the Lewis Mumford Center, University of Albany.

¹⁰ Financial asset wealth refers to liquid assets – cash, stocks, bonds. This wealth does not include real estate.

¹¹ This assumes a 7% annual growth rate through 2008.

¹² Refers to Chinese not in the United States.

nonprofits around the world. This is another area ripe for future research in evaluating the philanthropic potential in Greater China.

As the Asian population and subset of Chinese-Americans grows and continues to assimilate into mainstream American society, there are and will be more wealthy Chinese looking to give back, not just to their own families, but to American society which has provided the opportunities for many to amass their wealth. Growth in the Chinese population in America will continue as trade and commerce with Greater China increases, and as future generations of Chinese grow up and have their own families in the United States. The wealth generated by both the first-generation immigrant population and the subsequent American-born generations underscores the philanthropic potential of this population segment and its importance to the nonprofit sector.

Chinese Giving

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Chinese giving is the emphasis on having a personal connection in just about all of the transactions. With individual philanthropy, there is an emphasis on *guanxi* – literally, relationships or connections. As John Deeney states, this concept is “an extension of the friendship, trust, and obligation that comes from strong family unity.” (Koehn 168) As a result, the majority of philanthropy by Chinese-Americans has been in less formal methods, away from the charitable foundation model. Giving is mainly centered on providing for the family first, then the ethnic community, and then beyond that to mainstream society. Most giving has come in the form of remittances and community giving circles.

Many Chinese-Americans, particularly the first-generation immigrants, are unlikely and/or unwilling to write wills, make planned gifts, or leave bequests to charities. Why is this? Previous studies have shown that they “must perceive a level of financial and occupational stability not only for the individual self, but also for other family members and close associates before s/he will feel free to extend and commit significant financial contributions through more dissociated giving vehicles. The potential donor must have had a family or community experience as a contributor of time and money, and for Asians these have most often been with indigenous mutual aid associations or religious organizations.” (Chao 2) Without *guanxi*, it will be difficult to establish any kind of mutual relationship between a nonprofit and a Chinese donor.

Instead, Chinese have expressed philanthropy on an individual basis through giving back to relatives in their home country through remittances. Remittances can be defined as sums of money that a migrant worker sends back to his or her country of origin. (Stanton 1) According to World Bank, China received approximately US\$6 billion in remittances in 2000. Worldwide, over US\$90 billion remittances are received.¹³ This money is often able to support entire families and in some cases in rural parts of China, even a whole village. While remittances would not be classified as formal philanthropy, nonetheless there is a significant impact that needs to be taken into account. As Jessica Chao puts it, “Particularly within first-generation immigrant families of all economic classes, a considerable amount of financial aid in the form of remittances is sent to the “home country” not only to support family, but also to support

¹³ Source: The World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2002. Available at http://www.iadialog.org/publications/country_studies/remittances/worker_remit.pdf

community improvements, schools, and hospitals. Remittances can be significant, often collectively totaling in the millions or billions of dollars annually... No one ventures a guess as to the amount amassed and sent 'home' by ethnic Chinese, as the overseas population is so dispersed across so many countries and the monies 'sent home' is directed to various nations in Asia, not just to the People's Republic of China." (Chao 12)

Community giving circles have also long been an aspect of Chinese philanthropy, ever since the mutual aid association of the Chinese Six Companies (CSC) was formed in 1854. There are family associations, people associated by their surnames, and people in the same business and profession. (B. Smith 117) There were also rotating credit organizations, which provide a form of collective banking. Each member makes small monthly payments. Each month, the "pot" or total collection of money is given to one member as a disbursement. Each month, a different person will receive a large payment. A great deal of trust exists among rotating credit association members because if someone received funds and refused to continue making contributions until each member had received funds, there would be no recourse for the other members. As the payments rotated around the membership, each member eventually received a large sum of money with which to buy things, start a business, make a down payment on a house, or fulfill other financial obligations. (B. Smith 117)

Educational institutions have long been a popular recipient of Chinese philanthropy, likely owing to the strong emphasis of education by the Chinese. American universities and colleges, such as Harvard, Oberlin and Wellesley, had significant missionary-philanthropic links with China since the late 19th century. A philanthropic organization incorporated in New York in 1893, which later became the Lingnan Foundation, established a college in Canton (Guangzhou) that became Lingnan University and was later nationalized and merged with the Sun Yatsen (Zhongshan) University. (Young 15) With the high levels of educational attainment among Chinese-Americans and the high level of importance placed on getting a good education, many view this as a way to "give back" to the institutions that helped them the most. One of the most widely-reported gifts by a Chinese-American was when Gordon Wu gave \$100 million to Princeton University in the early 1990s. (Smith 6) A lesser known Chinese-American philanthropist is Robert Ho, a native of Hong Kong, who donated \$25 million to his alma mater, Colgate University, making it one of the largest gifts ever made by a Chinese-American. (Colgate 1) Those in the second and third generations may broaden their giving to universities or even museums as a way to gain access to mainstream social circles (Anft 1).

Beyond individual giving, there are some examples of corporate philanthropy, but which still exhibit a high level of *guanxi*. In corporate philanthropy, a small group of a company's major shareholders or foundation heads will make all the decisions, as opposed to having professional staff members or committees. In Hong Kong, where there is a viable philanthropic sector, this authority is so concentrated that some in the Hong Kong nonprofit sector think that no more than 200 people make all of the major giving decisions in the city. (Wong 23) As a result, personal connections are necessary if a nonprofit wants to get a grant, which often means the investment of a long-term relationship between the solicitor and donor, not between the donor and institution. (Wong 23)

Conclusion and Future Research

In the 21st century, the Chinese-American culture is transitioning from a majority first-generation immigrant group to a majority American-born Chinese. The implications of change for this population go well beyond measuring changes in attitudes towards philanthropy. However, even within philanthropy, many questions remain. As Chinese-Americans participate more fully in American society and American-born Chinese increase in numbers, are those that become wealthy more likely to become more involved in organized philanthropy in the United States? Will they remain generous only to their families and ethnic community, clinging to the more traditional Chinese idea of philanthropy? More than ever, there is great enthusiasm and commitment to preserving and strengthening one's ethnic identity and culture. Does this translate to giving only to ethnic-specific causes? Will giving spread to mainstream institutions such as universities, museums, and religious institutions instead? Perhaps wealthy Chinese-Americans will not give at all, and amass wealth only for themselves. There has been anecdotal evidence that many Chinese-Americans in their 30s and 40s do not give at all, and those that do give to their university, or to their church, but not to ethnic causes. Supporters of this opinion contend that after minorities assimilate into mainstream culture, giving to ethnic causes is no longer a priority. "When you become wealthy, you almost always move out of the neighborhood in which you were raised," says Hanmin Liu, president of the Wildflowers Institute, a nonprofit group in San Francisco that documents cultural traditions for foundations and others. "There are plenty of successful people who give, but don't give back to their communities." (Anft)

Achieving a balance between assimilation into mainstream culture and retention of one's traditional culture will continue to be a challenge for every immigrant group in America. (Shao 57) As Iris Chang put it, "The definition of 'Chinese American' itself will grow more complex with time. Already the lines between the ethnic Chinese and other groups are blurring." (Chang 401) Is a 'Chinese-American style' of giving emerging, and if it is, how is this similar or different from any other style of philanthropy? How much influence is there from Chinese culture, and how much influence is there from ideas of philanthropy in the United States?

To begin to answer these questions requires raising awareness of the concept of philanthropy to Chinese-Americans. One recommendation is to organize a systematic way of giving that encourages individual giving towards a community whose benefits are tangible. An example of an organization doing this is Give2Asia. Give2Asia is a grant making organization set up in 2000 by the Asia Foundation to promote giving to Asian countries. (Greene) The foundation has attracted over 100 donors who have given over \$1.5 million.

Gathering knowledge and contacts around local Chinese-American communities will also help encourage and increase the comfort level with the concept of philanthropy. Promoting examples of philanthropy by Chinese-Americans and developing the knowledge networks among wealthy Chinese will let other Chinese feel comfortable participating in the donor involvement process. One particular individual philanthropist has already begun this process. Charles Wang, founder of Computer Associates, a \$25 billion technology company, was one of the first Chinese to set up a foundation and to promote philanthropy. He stated, "We Chinese American entrepreneurs, artists and thinkers can add a lot more to our country by setting examples in how to give. Giving back to America should not only have a Rockefeller, a Ford, or a Gates nametag attached to it.

The America you and I know deserves a gift from everyone else who is in a position to give.”
(Committee Bridges 2002)

Future research needs to investigate in detail the behaviors and attitudes of Chinese-Americans towards philanthropy. Planned future research includes:

- Interviews with Chinese and non-Chinese donors and nonprofit leaders to determine what is being done to cultivate philanthropy among the Chinese, and discover what would enable more wealthy Chinese to engage in philanthropy;
- Developing a survey of attitudes towards philanthropy and analyzing differences between the first generation Chinese-American, second generation Chinese-American, and so forth;
- Detailed studies on the Chinese population in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Washington, D.C. to examine the links between Chinese-American culture, wealth, and attitudes about philanthropy.

As we have seen, the spirit of Chinese philanthropy continues from old Chinese society to today. The philanthropic potential of the Chinese-American population is sizable. There are needs in the Chinese-American population today that can be met through increased philanthropic participation. There are also many ways that Chinese-Americans can utilize their wealth to benefit the greater community beyond their families, relatives, and local ethnic community. Donors and nonprofits need to be brought together through systematic organization and knowledge sharing among Chinese-Americans. By utilizing and increasing the knowledge we have about giving and philanthropy among Chinese-Americans, we will expand the possibilities for philanthropy and ultimately a greater good for society.

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