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STORYTELLERS AS PHILANTHROPIC CHAMPIONS

An Interview with Claire Chiang



Singapore's charity sector is undergoing significant changes to enhance management quality, accountability and transparency. But despite these positive changes, Ms Claire Chiang, entrepreneur and philanthropist, argues that Singapore also needs to cultivate a more visionary and global approach to philanthropy. She shares with Social Space her thoughts on storytelling and the need for mentors to champion the most urgent causes of the day.

SS: To start with the basics, how do we encourage companies to value giving?

CC: Storytelling is very important. I think we lack the skills to script a holistic story about the compassionate dollar. For example, we are short of millions of dollars to eradicate the polio virus.¹ The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave US\$355 million in 2009 towards the cause. Rotary International pledged to raise US\$200 million in matching funds within 3 years. They are at about US\$100 million now. This programme is being managed by Rotary International, along with many partners including the World Health Organisation.

It's a public health threat in that if it affects one child, it has the ability to affect many more. So right there, you have a good story, a good cause and good champions in Bill and Melinda Gates. Then you have the infrastructure, which is the Rotary International with about 33,000 members. In Singapore,

the rotary clubs organised an event to raise funds, which 300 Rotarians attended. At the same time, a private donor has agreed to match whatever we raised collectively with a 20% donation. So in any endeavour to encourage people to part with their dollar, you need these three elements – a compelling story, credible champions and infrastructural support.

SS: So do you believe that we have to move towards cause-driven philanthropy?

CC: Absolutely. So for example, it can be energy and the environment; or it can be poverty, or disabilities. That focus is critical.

SS: The Community Foundation, which is run by the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC), channels the donations of high net-worth individuals in Singapore to relevant causes donors wish to support. Do you think this model works?

Claire Chiang

Ms Claire Chiang is Senior Vice President of Banyan Tree Holdings Ltd and Chairperson of Banyan Tree Global Foundation. Her role involves directing and guiding the continual process of Banyan Tree Holding's overall commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility. She also sits on the Global Governing Board of Caux Round Table (CRT), where she is Vice-Chair for Asia.

CC: There are philanthropists who really don't care to be in control, to administer and manage the running of a foundation. These are people who should give their contributions to a central depository of this kind. They want to give it to a general vehicle because it's audited and it is transparent. There are small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that have a team of 20 people, but they make good money, or they have a giving culture. If they decide to give it to a general vehicle, that is also good. On the other hand, some people have a more sophisticated understanding of meaningful philanthropy. So they want to align what they give with what they are actually doing and they want to carefully decide whether they can contribute in kind, in services, in an advisory capacity and so on. So I don't think a centralised foundation or vehicle should be the only model out there. I think there's space for every institution of giving. I call it the "giving culture" or giving institutions.

SS: Do you think such giving is motivated by a truly philanthropic spirit, or is it good for an individual's or company's image?

CC: Singaporean companies are generous, including the small companies. They do not give donations merely as a public relations move. I personally donate my own money and our company is acknowledged. There are many people who also give anonymously. There are different kinds of giving behaviour. Some do not give money, but their time and resources. I do not second-guess people's motivations. For me, every gesture and every dollar counts. It is always a step in the right direction to nurture the giving culture.

SS: The National Council of Social Service's (NCSS) model is to cover a broad range of unmet social needs. Do you think that model is out-dated?

CC: The NCSS is not a philanthropic body. It focuses on serving the professional needs of social services so that these organisations can offer enhanced services. It coordinates social services, but it does not coordinate philanthropy. It raises funds through the Community Chest and both are government-run. So a closer equivalent of a philanthropic body is the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC).

SS: Do you think it is best for the NCSS and Community Chest to be run by government, rather than the civil or social sector?

CC: People donate to the Community Chest because it has a long history and therefore, a long-running tradition of garnering support through donations.

It is audited, it is safe and dependable. They also have very stringent criteria in terms of which organisations they help, how they provide assistance and the amount given. The causes are focused on the needy and vulnerable. Accountability is a big issue and their report book has to be reviewed because of a number of bad hats. As a result of the recent charity scandals in Singapore, people are more mindful now about whom they are giving their dollar to. Some review annual reports and note the members of the board of organisations before they give. So if it is run by civil bodies, the scrutiny would be even more heightened. I think there would be greater distrust.

SS: But aren't the recent charity scandals an indication that people were too trusting of such bodies, due to government patronage?

CC: I agree. But I don't think it will be any more efficient if it goes into hands of civil bodies. The element of building and maintaining trust may not necessarily be higher.

SS: In order for our civil sector to mature, should we not encourage less dependence on government regulation and assistance?

CC: I think there is already evidence of this. There are many family service centres and non-profit organisations that run effective programmes by raising their own funds, through their boards. They go through a hard time doing this. They get some funds from the Community Chest, but it is insufficient. They don't have the requisite skills to do fund raising because this isn't their core competence. Their job is to support and create programmes, and energy that is taken away from this compromises the services they provide. So what has to be clear is the nature of the work performed by civil bodies and how we can support that without having them dilute their energies too much by fund raising.

SS: Is it also fair to observe that charities are wary of going beyond the ambit that has been set because they fear they won't get funding from this centralised source?

CC: Our civil sector is underdeveloped in this regard, yes. But I think we face a greater challenge in growing the sector and allowing it to mature. The potential for growth in Singapore is limited. If you leave it to self-initiating approaches, or you take a laissez-faire approach, without the NCSS and the Community Chest governing the sector, I think the competition might be daunting. Even if I agree in principle with a change in approach, I wonder who these paradigm-changers will be in reality.

The tradition of tripartism. People are cynical about it because they see it as co-optation by the government. But the government, non-profit and business sectors works as a tripartite model. I'd rather go in with that model and work at it than stand on the side-lines and do nothing. At this point, I work with NGOs, academics and government on the issue of work-life integration. I think a multi-stakeholder approach is the way forward.

I don't think we have enough people in Singapore to run such institutions at that level. The supply base for such advocates is too small. I also feel that the infrastructure legitimised by the law to start this is absent. We have a lot of international agencies, but they are focused on global issues.

SS: Is this a problem with the size of Singapore and its population?

CC: Yes. The same problem with lack of size and talent pool afflicts both the business and the civil sectors. Take small and medium enterprises for example (SMEs). They feel they have been ignored and they have been complaining about this for decades. But SMEs get a lot of government support. There are a lot of schemes to assist them. To what extent and for how long should we give that support, before we recognise that they are not competitive? Their problems are also with respect to the size of the market and human resources. So I think what applies in the private sector also applies for the non-profit sector.

SS: Hasn't the government characterised SMEs as the future drivers of growth?

CC: Yes, this is true. There are numerous contradictions in that regard. While we want to encourage SMEs, we must ask ourselves whether they are competitive and how long and to what extent we should use taxpayers' money to support them. Some will die naturally and some should! The same applies for non-profits – some will and have died naturally as well.

SS: What are your observations on how the landscape of giving has changed?

CC: I think civic participation is a lot more creative now. Our government has a lot to achieve in its community building efforts, with the budget set for the purpose. It also has to deliver social expectations which taxpayers wish for. However, the government hesitates to provide everything for the community and in the hopes that Singaporeans will seek and formulate solutions collectively. I think it is the government's firm belief that by participation and

engagement, Singaporeans will develop a sense of belonging as a nation.

SS: Have you seen an expression of greater independence, despite the limits that have been set?

CC: I think the NCSS has evolved. The permission band is fairly wide now. It has opened up in the past decade. If the government doesn't of itself support a programme, but the Board does, they can still get programme funding. I think what is lacking is board governance. I think there are too many people who sit on boards with no understanding of what the work involves. They don't attend meetings because it's a tremendous amount of work and it takes time. I think board members of organisations should go through a governance training programme so that they understand the scope of services that can be implemented: Whose responsibility it is to raise funds; what management is doing and so on. It is no different from running a company. In some instances, a non-profit veers off in a different direction and the Board is unable to rein them in, in which case it is an ineffective body. The culture of treating boards as entities that simply rubber-stamp decisions has to change.

SS: You mentioned champions for causes. Do we lack local champions who will take up local and global causes?

CC: I don't think we're sophisticated enough to think in an organised manner regarding a global approach to philanthropy. People do it individually in their own small ways. They don't want to be organised in larger ways.

SS: So what does it take to raise more champions?

CC: At least one hundred years of storytelling! I don't think we have willing mentors who will give their time to this. Many are engaged in advisory roles, they provide patronage. But we lack cognitive engagement. We do not have activist mentors who work across sectors and agencies. I also think the element of trust is lacking. The general sophistication that is required to understand brokering work for society is absent. So my approach

is to put aside what government can do, is willing to do and is already doing and take that as given. I feel that my role is to get people or groups to work together, identify different competencies, 'connect the dots', if you like, and do the work. I then ask the government if they are willing to get involved.

SS: What can organisations like the Lien Centre for Social Innovation (LCSI) do in this regard?

CC: Every idea you generate takes at least 3 years to come to fruition. So you have to be persistent. You cannot stop. Singapore also needs thought-leadership and facilitation-leadership. That is what LCSI is well-positioned to do. By this I mean the kind of facilitation at an overarching level where like-minded people meet, talk and share in order to avoid duplication of efforts. I also think we need to move away from the existing paradigm where people test the waters before they take up a cause. Too many people want to assess if the agenda has a pre-existing guarantee of support. We also need to learn to leverage and create multipliers. But we tend to be territorial, we create silos. We want to claim credit, we want to be the leader and we want control. People are not willing to do the back-stage, thinking work. We have so many leaders they end up killing each other, so to speak. We don't have enough proficient followers and doers. I also think the Lien Centre should be a partnership broker.

SS: How do you leverage?

CC: You leverage by knowing who is doing what. A centre like yours can be that facilitating body without needing your name out there. You have to let other people claim the credit. There is not enough

awareness or knowledge out there of who is doing what and for what cause and what the outcomes are, because people do not read annual reports.

SS: What other methods do you think will facilitate this process?

CC: The tradition of tripartism. People are cynical about it because they see it as co-optation by the government. But the government, non-profit and business sectors works as a tripartite model. I'd rather go in with that model and work at it than stand on the side-lines and do nothing. At this point, I work with NGOs, academics and government on the issue of work-life integration. I think a multi-stakeholder approach is the way forward.

SS: Finally, what do you foresee for the civil sector? What makes you optimistic?

Claire: The civil sector has become a lot more organised and professionalised. The media has also been covering its activities to create the awareness. I see various groups attempting to develop collaborative models with businesses, government agencies and other NGOs to achieve greater social impact. These are very good signs in that organisations with laudable goals feel they do not need to be alone in achieving community goals. They realise they can work in a more collective manner to achieve bigger goals by aligning their resources to the causes. I've also been observing that more Singaporeans are reaching out to regional and global agencies to lend their expertise and offer their resources. I think this is a cause for optimism because it means people are looking beyond their immediate prosperity to what they can give of their time and skills to social causes. I think this phenomenon, in time, will strengthen Singapore's giving culture.

¹ Wild Poliovirus Weekly Update. <http://www.polioeradication.org/casecount.asp>