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Of Modest Giving, Community Values and Social Change: An Interview with Hsieh Fu Hua

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OF MODEST GIVING, COMMUNITY VALUES & SOCIAL CHANGE

An Interview with Hsieh Fu Hua



Recognising the need for building capability and filling in critical gaps in management training, expertise and research in Singapore's social scene, businessman and contemporary art enthusiast Hsieh Fu Hua has established Binjai Tree to make his contribution in a more structured fashion. Yet he reminisces about the cultural tradition of communities providing solidarity and support to its members and tells Social Space why a more modest and quiet approach to the simple act of giving is a way to encourage more Singaporeans to cultivate a spirit of altruism.

SS: What prompted you to make the transition into philanthropic work by setting up Binjai Tree?

HFH: It wasn't a change that happened overnight. It is something that grows in you and is a part of you. Binjai Tree is merely providing form and structure to something that I have already been doing or have wished to do. It is rather like being a sole proprietorship, running a small outfit that is not registered. You can do this, or you can choose to set something up formally that is registered. But prior to the registration and formation of an entity, you must already be doing the work. The passion to contribute must be there. Money is only a facet of the larger work. So when I created Binjai Tree, it was not about money. It was about putting in time and effort to realise these goals. Of course, having created it, one realises it absorbs a great deal of one's energy. If you're not ready for that kind

of commitment, to me, you are no different from a fund that writes cheques all year around. It has to be an expression of your desire to engage with this kind of work. I also pointedly call it a charity, not a foundation. To me, charity represents that personal commitment and undertaking. Foundations suggest something grander with larger sums of money involved.

SS: How do we encourage philanthropy among individuals, families and the larger corporate sector?

HFH: To all of these various actors, I would say there are two ways to look at how you can contribute. You can do it when you are ready, or you can contribute from where you are, rather than waiting until you are ready, because the ideal moment is one that can be put away for a long time.

Hsieh Fu Hua

Mr Hsieh is Co-Founder & Advisor of PrimePartners group of companies and also heads Binjai Tree. He is Executive Director of Temasek Holdings, and a member of the National University of Singapore Board of Trustees and the National Arts Council.

We have set some simple goals and we have three specific areas we are looking at. The first has already started, though it is in its early stages right now. Namely, we've given rise to another charity called Shared Services for Charities, which was set up together with SGX. PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers) and a few other organisations are also involved. The focus here is to help improve the standards of governance and capabilities in this sector. As we all know, charities are dominated by passionate people. But sometimes they are not disciplined in how they harness that effort, at least in terms of meeting the requirements of the law and of financial accountability. The goal is to raise the standards for non-profit organisations.

SS: What does Binjai Tree represent and what does it focus on?

HFH: It reflects how I feel and how I see my work, so I try to look at both general and specific giving. In life, a lot of the giving people engage in is quite general. You are approached by an organisation with a cause and you are prompted to give. You also do it when your heart is touched. But once you apply your mind to more specific giving, you realise that you have to do more. That is where the corporate experience comes in. How do you scale up in your giving? That is one of the questions we are trying to address at this juncture.

SS: What do you hope to achieve through Binjai Tree that you could not do functioning as a "sole proprietorship"?

HFH: The ability to connect with people. An organisation enables you to create structures and engage in a disciplined way. As a sole proprietor you can choose to do or not to do business on any given day. But once you have set up an entity, you are forced to do things. There is a process to it. Of course I can leave it to be moribund, but what is the point in that? All the structures of governance come into play and you become far more accountable to everyone you have appointed as your colleagues. It significantly changes what you might have done as a sole proprietorship.

SS: What is your mid-term and long-term vision for Binjai Tree?

HFH: We have set some simple goals and we have three specific areas we are looking at. The first has already started, though it is in its early stages right now. Namely, we've given rise to another charity called Shared Services for Charities, which was set up together with SGX. PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers) and a few other organisations are also involved.

The focus here is to help improve the standards of governance and capabilities in this sector. As we all know, charities are dominated by passionate people. But sometimes they are not disciplined in how they harness that effort, at least in terms of meeting the requirements of the law and of financial accountability. The goal is to raise the standards for non-profit organisations.

SS: What is the second area of focus for Binjai Tree?

HFH: The second area is mental health. In our country, we have filled and continue to fill stomachs, by and large. But the spirit may still be tormented!

SS: Mental health is a broad area. Are you also focusing on stress and anxiety, apart from psychiatric illnesses?

HFH: Certainly. A lot of depression goes untreated. That is the next stage of development. Religion can handle that need, but for now we are looking at the secular solutions. This is much more difficult as it is a new area. I have been studying it and examining capabilities and have discovered that it is very fragmented.

SS: How are you tackling the absence of data on clinically relevant anxiety?

HFH: One way is to take a top-down academic approach, while the other is to take a ground-up approach. We have formed a working group and we are collaborating with the National Council of Social Service (NCSS). This comes back to my earlier point about structures and how you network with existing organisations. So we have networked with NCSS and the Singapore Anglican Church. The latter has a very strong focus on providing medical services with a core emphasis on mental health. They run clinics and they are highly professional. Having seen

that, I decided to network with them to try and see how the three of us can work with the rest of the sector and bring more shared capabilities to address this problem. There are a lot of small new bodies starting up, but they are each struggling with various issues. A lot of anxiety disorders are untreated and it is quite prevalent among the young. We can recognise mental health issues with the old, but it is harder to identify it in the young. This is a big area to tackle, so of course government has to be involved and indeed, they have expressed an interest in being involved. The Ministry of Health has a mental health plan, but they cannot do it alone, as they are only dealing with clinically and mentally ill people, whereas many people with mental health issues have not yet reached the clinical stage.

So within our own community, how can various entities come in to assist? Dealing with mental health requires a great deal of support. So I see Binjai Tree as taking initiative and using the corporate experience and discipline to try and bring capabilities and solutions for society.

SS: What is the third area of focus?

HFH: The third area is the development of the arts – an area that charities don't traditionally focus on. I have a personal interest in contemporary arts in particular and I am currently involved in the National Art Gallery. I see this as an essential part of how we grow Singapore. Culture is an integral part of it. It is a reflection of our time as well, in that focusing on contemporary art would naturally involve focusing on younger people.

SS: So do you see your role as a catalyst and enabler, rather than a doer? If so, why?

HFH: Yes, that is how I see my role. I believe in harnessing organisations that are already in existence to provide them with greater clarity, more networks, capability – in essence, whatever it takes for them to grow well.

SS: How large is Binjai Tree?

HFH: I have 3 active volunteers who are also directors of Binjai Tree. One works with me in evaluating requests and assists me in the implementation of the projects in mental health and contemporary art. One leads Shared Services for Charities. One other manages the funds. We also draw on a small pool of other volunteers. So we all use our personal time, our personal networks and connections to do the work.

Of course, we're only a year old and in time, we will grow. But I want to be careful in my choice of who joins Binjai Tree as I want people who can bring something of value to the organisation. For this kind of work, you need highly-skilled people with an interest and passion for the three areas I specified earlier. At the same time, as we nurture a project, we find people who can then confidently take over the reins. So we are also playing a catalytic role in that respect.

SS: Were you motivated to undertake a catalytic role because our non-profit, non-governmental sector is too uncoordinated and fragmented?

HFH: I don't think that was the motivation. I didn't look at it from top-down and address gaps. My interest in social change and charity comes from my own background. My father very much encouraged volunteerism. He was very active in social work when I was young. So he was a role model. I also realised that you can do it by doing the work itself; or you can create a project and marshal people; or you can become a catalyst. There are many ways to approach giving. I was also moved by the tremendous amount of self-help in the community that I witnessed when I stayed in Hong Kong for four years.

SS: Do you think Hong Kong generally has a greater spirit of self-help?

A: I think so. I think greater research should be done to substantiate this observation. The NGO activity in Hong Kong is very strong. I was there during the Asian financial crisis. A lot of people were losing jobs. I discovered that Caritas Internationalis took on the rather daunting task of re-training thousands of people who had been retrenched, in order to prepare them for the changes and convulsions that Hong Kong was going through. I thought this was remarkable. Caritas is well-funded, no doubt. What facilitated this is that church land is deployable beyond religious purposes. It can also be used for commercial and educational purposes. So for example, a church might occupy the top floor of a commercial building and the entire building belongs to the church. That kind of financial capability enabled them to launch their efforts on a much larger scale.

Yet another observation I made from my conversations with Hong Kong government officials is that the British government in their time saw the need to foster NGO activity. They saw potential in encouraging the non-profit and private sectors to work together to provide solutions to the community.

I am encouraged that more young Singaporeans seem to be seeking out new ways of making a living, rather than treading on well-worn career paths. They are keen to go where their hearts will take them.

So the government would rather fund NGOs who do this kind of work, than undertaking it themselves. As a result, a lot of services in Hong Kong are provided by the NGOs, which are supported and funded by the government.

SS: Don't we have that in Singapore as well?

HFH: Yes we do, but I don't think we have it on as large a scale as they do in Hong Kong. I think it has been a deliberate strategy there. So I am keen to see a proper study being conducted on this phenomenon, since what I know is based on anecdotal evidence.

SS: Do you generally feel a greater sense of vibrancy there in terms of the non-profit sector?

HFH: Yes, I do, but it is anecdotal again. Caritas is just one example in Hong Kong, for which we have no real equivalent in Singapore, in terms of having the capability to undertake work of that scale.

SS: Do you think it stems from a different concept of government?

HFH: I think it stems from different historical circumstances. Prior to 1997, Hong Kong had been under colonial rule. The Hong Kong community as a result were largely self-reliant and they had to take ownership of their own well-being. I think it's possible in Singapore as well, but it doesn't mean it has to happen without help from government. Much of this work is clearly geared to provide for society, and government has a role to play in providing for society. I also think it makes sense for the government to want the NGOs and the community to share ownership of this work because then you can draw on their ability to execute the task on the ground.

SS: What would it take in Singapore to build a greater sense of commitment and vibrancy, in the manner which you saw in Hong Kong? What needs to change?

HFH: I think NCSS is already playing a role by providing funds for charitable organisations. It is a question of stepping up the scale. With greater scale you can do more and look for public-private

partnerships. The partnerships then lead to the sprouting of more such networks. That is the source of greater vibrancy.

SS: Is individual philanthropy an area that needs further development in Singapore?

HFH: I am inclined to use the word "giving" as philanthropy sounds like something only the wealthy can do! So, all of us as individuals can do more "giving".

SS: How has the culture of giving changed in Singapore then, broadly speaking?

HFH: I think there was much more giving in the early days of development in this country. People had to give because if they didn't assist each other, nobody else would. The government support structures were inadequate at that juncture. I was recently in Penang and was intrigued to see how they have kept the culture of *kongsi* alive. The clan houses are well-preserved and I went to see the Khoo Kongsi, which is the most outstanding clan house there with lots of *kongsi* property surrounding it. All this belonged to the Khoo clan. They are proud of all of the members of the clan who have graduated and succeeded in the world. All of this would not be possible were it not for the community support, and the manner in which funds of the clan are used to assist their members.

So community life mattered too in Singapore's early history. If the eldest child was educated, he was expected to finance the education of the younger siblings. That sense of commitment to give to family and community was powerful because there was a very real need.

I think it is less obvious today in Singapore, in that the sense of community is disassociated. If you have money, it is spent on lifestyle and on personal consumption. We are a more prosperous society, but I wonder what has happened to that ethic of giving. The goals that occupy us now is personal success, whereas in the past the larger good of the community mattered. Your role in life had to do with how you connected with your immediate community. Whereas now, it is measured by what you achieve for yourself.

The United States is an excellent example of a prosperous and highly materialistic society that also has a strong culture of giving. Like many countries across the world, both the U.S. and Singapore have been built by migrants and are quite multicultural. The difference is in landmass and population. The U.S. is a huge country of over 300 million inhabitants. Singapore, on the other hand, is a tiny island with a population of 4.6 million. In essence, I feel that migrant communities in the U.S. have been able to continue living in strong, distinct communities, spread out all over the country in typical American small towns, where they have been able to maintain their values over time.

SS: The government set up the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) in 1999 in recognition of this sea-change in the culture of community giving in Singapore. Do you see a turn-around since it was set up?

HFH: I think it is early days yet and we will have to wait a while before we truly know the impact. The United States is an excellent example of a prosperous and highly materialistic society that also has a strong culture of giving. Like many countries across the world, both the U.S. and Singapore have been built by migrants and are quite multicultural. The difference is in landmass and population. The U.S. is a huge country of over 300 million inhabitants. Singapore, on the other hand, is a tiny island with a population of 4.6 million. In essence, I feel that migrant communities in the U.S. have been able to continue living in strong, distinct communities, spread out all over the country in typical American small towns, where they have been able to maintain their values over time. The Quakers and the Amish communities are good examples

of that. To use a term more familiar to us here in Singapore, the United States is still largely a country of heartlanders. That isn't possible in Singapore for several reasons. For one, we're just too small. We can't build distinct communities with limited physical space. In a way, this also hasn't been allowed with good reason because we don't want segregation, communal fissures and tensions to build in our society. But as a result we are becoming a global city in which close-knit communities with distinct values are dissipating rapidly.

SS: Do you have any observations about young Singaporeans and their values?

HFH: I am encouraged that more young Singaporeans seem to be seeking out new ways of making a living, rather than treading on well-worn career paths. They are keen to go where their hearts will take them. They seem to be driven by a desire to make a change or a difference, rather than being driven principally by material need. To use a term from business school, I see greater self-actualisation.