2012

Reclaiming Singapore's Lost Soul - An interview with Stanley Tan

Lien Centre for Social Innovation

perspectives

RECLAIMING SINGAPORE'S LOST SOUL

An interview with Stanley Tan

Stanley Tan Poh Leng is a successful businessman and volunteer. He is founder of the investment company, Global Advisory Group; controller shareholder and CEO of the Angliss Property Group; and executive chairman of Global Yellow Pages Ltd in Singapore. He is currently the chairman of the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre, and the Community Foundation of Singapore. He is also vice-president of Beyond Social Services, MILK ("Mainly I Love Kids") Fund, and a board member of the Charity Council and the Alola Foundation. Tan is also actively involved in helping children in New Zealand, Timor Leste, Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines.

As Singapore's volunteer chief, **Stanley Tan** has been championing a more active citizenry and finding back the lost soul of Singapore. Social Space catches up with the chairman of the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) for his insights on Singaporeans and the social sector.

Social Space (SS): Lately, you've been talking about the lost soul of Singapore. What do you mean by this?

Stanley Tan (ST): When I was growing up in a kampung, we were a poor family, but we looked after each other. We also had a lot of help from others in the kampung.

During the racial riots of 1964, it was my Malay neighbours who warned me—a Chinese boy—not to go to school and to stay home because of the violence going on outside. They looked out for me. It was neighbours first, and race second. Now, we are at risk of becoming about "me only and others don't count."

Now, we are like hotel guests living with strangers. We expect the government to provide it all. There is a limited sense of self-help, of community help.

Life is not about how much we have in order to achieve what is needed. It is about how well we use what we have to achieve the best out of it.

And Singaporeans are running into a trap where we think it is a prerequisite to have the good life, rather than learning to collectively make a good life out of whatever we have.

We have become cold, organised and clinical. We have become a non-entity. This is why I am against neutralising heritage in schools. Sure, the downside may be that we are creating enclaves, but the upside is much greater than the downside. And the downside can be addressed.

There is a need to resurrect the community spirit in Singapore.

SS: Singapore's volunteerism rate is at an all-time high of 23 percent according to NVPC's latest survey. Are you not proud of this and does it not show that the community spirit is alive and well?

ST: Our volunteerism rate is still far below that of the First World countries. The US and Australia are in the thirties, and the UK and Canada are in the forties.

In my kampung days, the volunteerism rate was 100 percent! That's why NVPC has a programme called "Vertical Kampung"—to recapture the spirit of the kampong in our high-rise jungles.

We need to nurture this natural sense of belonging. It's the whole theory of family. If I don't have a family unit, why do I care about the neighbourhood? If I don't have a neighbourhood, why do I care about an area or district? If I don't have a district, why do I care about my country? It starts with the nucleus of the family and then branches outwards.

SS: When you say that Singapore is losing its soul, the presumption is that we had a soul to start with.

ST: Yes, we had. We must remember that Singapore was birthed out of generosity and giving. This country was poor. We were jobless, unemployed and illiterate. But there were those who came forward to give, to change it all.

I want to state that it is easier to criticise than to do. So my comments are meant to further the discussion, rather than to point blame.

We are fortunate that most of our political leaders gave of themselves for the good of the majority. But beyond the formal leadership, there were the clans, the missionaries who built schools, welfare homes, and the like. And of course, we had the wealthy, the Lee Kong Chians who gave beyond what they needed to.

What they all received in return was secondary, it was not their primary motivation. They just gave. So, yes, we had the community soul. I know it's provocative for me to say that we have lost the Singaporean soul, but we are at the crossroads.

The good news is that we have not quite lost it completely. If we had, we would not have seen the outpouring of emotion and donations following the mishaps of recent years.

SS: So the Singaporean soul only shows up when there is a major mishap and the people rally together?

ST: The soul is still there, but it is not nurtured. In fact, we are not given the ability to express it. Singaporeans naturally express when given the chance to. It showed during major incidents like SARS, the Asian Tsunami and the recent regional earthquakes and natural disasters.

But our ability to help has been eroded over time, especially the simple acts. Many such acts of compassion have been given to government and somewhat politicised. Maybe unintentionally, the government, through its many regulations and agencies, wants to organise and channel our giving.

SS: So efficiency and institutionalism are robbing us of our soul?

ST: I wouldn't say that. Our success is the main culprit that has eroded our soul.

Our first post-independence government developed this design and it was implemented in the landscape of those times. It was so well designed and successful that it became, and remained, the fixed framework for how things should work, be it our education or our workforce. But it did not evolve sufficiently with the changing landscape.

Now our government continues to plan everything, they do not leave things to develop naturally. They implement policies to influence the number of kids we should have, the number of languages we should learn and so on. Indeed, these policies were initially needed to guide an impoverished, less educated and exposed society, but we have failed to see that actually, more than just the framework, it is the ecosystem that makes a country resilient and whole, along with mistakes and downsides.

Our system has become too rigid and directive. The design has taken over and become the master instead of being the tool. We don't need to discover anymore. That's our flaw. We don't trust ourselves anymore. We trust our plans more than we trust ourselves.

So we have come to a situation where our government still trusts the system, but the people don't trust the system anymore.

The ministerial salary is a case in point.

We don't need to discover anymore. That's our flaw. We don't trust ourselves anymore. We trust our plans more than we trust ourselves.

SS: So you disagree with the current revised approach of the ministerial salaries where the salaries are pegged to a discount to the benchmark of the top 1,000 earners in the country?

ST: I disagree with their arguments. I don't think the disagreement that people have is about the salary per se. The issue is more about the loss of connection between the leaders and the people. The salary is a symptomatic issue rather than a primary issue. It doesn't matter what the pay is revised to since there is no benchmark for what is overpayment. The "overpayment" is an expression of disconnect and distrust. What both the leadership and the people are not expressing well is the loss of connection.

With the first government, the people were willing to die for them because they trusted them and because the government's interests were aligned with the people's interest. But it is not the case anymore as there is no more need for such an ethos. People today have many alternatives and are mobile. And by this, I am not criticising the current government. I am criticising the language that they are using and the framing and occasional avoidance of the issues.

I think salary is a small issue, but it became a big issue because it was politicised. When the argument is that nobody would want to serve without adequate rewards, then it seems to imply that leaders and civil servants serve because of the rewards. I know this is not the intended message, but this is what people hear. Ironically, our government wants to encourage volunteerism and philanthropy, but this pay issue makes all of us in the social sector appear stupid because we are willing to serve without pay and suggests that what we do is worthless. So the mistake is they monetise the value of leadership, civil service, social service etc and we are left in a position of having to justify every role with calculated remuneration. This is despite the fact that we all know that "not everything that is valuable can be counted."

My belief is government should have just argued for adequate compensation and the need to have the willing, committed and the best in public service, not just those with adequate financial means. And the system should allow the person to forgo the monetary perks he enjoyed in the private sector, should he want to make that switch.

Take Steve Green for example. He gave up his chairmanship at the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation to serve as a trade minister in the UK. He chose to serve with effectively no salary. He asked for a nominal one pound as his way of expressing his contribution to his nation. Because any pay would not be able to match up to his previous pay. That's an exemplary expression of his office.

SS: How about pay in the social sector? There are quite a number of thought leaders such as Jennie Chua who believe that the social sector pay should be raised.

ST: My view is very similar to that of political pay. First, if you want to get rich, the social sector is not the place to be. People must accept that. Compensation should allow those who serve in this place to lead what is an acceptable livelihood. But the system must also allow people to serve out of altruism because they can. Economic sacrifice is a representation of the soul of the sector and should be retained. If you want to be rich, then work in the private sector and donate back to charity. If you still ask for a high salary, then it is not a service anymore, it is a job and you have robbed the service of its soul.

SS: But is the present level of social sector pay adequate as a living wage?

ST: This can be answered at two levels. At the senior end, it is not adequate but at the low to mid-end, I believe that it is adequate.

At the senior levels, we need a full-time executive who earns enough to be able to support his family as well. Currently, levels of pay make this difficult for many.

However, the lower levels should be a transient position that is designed to capture as many altruistic people as possible. It serves more or less as a funnel that filters people into those who are transient and those who are answering a long-term calling. In a way, it is like audit firms where for the first few years, employees work hard for little. After two to three years, with their added value, they can choose to go to a firm that can pay more.

It's also like the National Service pay, where men 16-20 years old are called to join the national military, police force or civil defence for very minimal wages. Why can't they also be mobilised towards the social sector?

The determination of wages depends on how the leadership views the social sector and right now, my take is they are not viewing it seriously enough because the government has taken over a majority of those functions.

SS: Why is it bad for the government to take over these functions? Many civil society organisations are calling for the government to do more.

ST: The government may have the head knowledge and the technical details, but in its implementation, the heart component is understandably limited and sometimes even non-existent.

More effectively, the government should help people to overcome suffering, instead of just removing the suffering. There is a difference. By helping people to overcome suffering, you empower them. But if you merely remove the obstacles in their path, you often create dependency, just like a parent who is overly concerned about insulating his child from every risk. And then you hope the child is able to think and fend for himself—how can we expect the child to acquire that skill?

> We forget that the sector is, by nature, diverse and spontaneous. We cannot organise it too much, otherwise, we don't respond to real needs and end up merely addressing the symptoms.

So we have a problem of success, more than a problem of failure. In the process, we become so dependent on the functional component that we forget the ecosystem. We forget that the sector is, by nature, diverse and spontaneous. We cannot organise it too much, otherwise, we don't respond to real needs and end up merely addressing the symptoms.

So now we have a situation where the government can't help but to keep on helping the people, because the now dependent votes demand it. But as they keep on helping, the people end up wanting more. This problem is self-perpetuating and needs to be addressed or we will pay a very high price for it in the medium to long term.

SS: Many have argued that the government is not doing enough to care for the poor in Singapore, that its view of the poor and their needs is too harsh.

ST: That is a broad issue. The government can do more, but in macro areas like infrastructure and environment. The micro areas should be left to the people sector.

In fact, the people sector must take proactive steps to re-own this space, which we have lost because we disowned it. A significant portion of the welfare role should be played by the people sector, while the government drives the enablement, infrastructure and policy matters.

SS: How did this state of affairs come about? Did the people sector give up the space or was it co-opted by the government?

ST: I may sound controversial, but it's like a freedom fighter winning democracy for his country. That was how it was for the early government, where the fight was obvious and where the challenges were clear—basic needs like jobs, housing, education and basic healthcare. But as we progressed, the basic issues were successfully resolved and needs became more complex and subjective. The government naturally deepened its intervention rather than allowing for a natural evolution to more of the community self-help model. Hence, instead of enabling the social space, the government ended up owning it.

SS: But isn't that what the Many Helping Hands approach is: To have civil society and community actors coming together with the government to address social issues?

ST: I think we need to look at the current reality of Many Helping Hands rather than the hopeful intent. The current state is one where the many helping hands are overly organised and largely directed by the government. It is not these hands helping by responding to needs as they see fit. The government may be concerned to let the space go because they are used to it being predictable. I also sense they think this will reduce wastage and improve efficiency.

I believe it works mostly to the contrary. If the people sector takes ownership, they will instinctively exercise greater accountability. A few bad apples will abuse this, but the positives will outweigh the negatives.

The problem is there should not be any particular formula in the social sector. There is no need for consolidation except for areas such as institutionalised care. For the rest, social sector organisations should be allowed to flourish since there can never be enough of them. Having 1,000 people to champion a child is as impactful as having one person helping 1,000 children. It's like in the movie "Saving Private Ryan," where you have a platoon saving a soldier.

Like a carpet, society is intricate. The more knots it has, the stronger it becomes. It there are less knots, it becomes weaker. Similarly, if we strive to simplify society and make it predictable, it can tear easily.

SS: Let's now talk about the citizens. Are we unfair to our leaders? You have said that we are like hotel guests who treat our leaders as hotel managers whom we abuse when something goes wrong.

ST: After the last general election, Singaporeans learnt that they have a voice, but they are like a teenager growing up and trying to push the boundaries with his parent. Say a teenage son has just gotten his driving license and would like to get a Ferrari. If the parents just give it to him, the son might get hurt and the parents will suffer.

So the people are testing the leadership. In the past, our government tried to make the right decision even if it was painful. Under the new norm, our government risks being an over-indulgent parent where they can unwittingly give in to the wrong areas. Today, it is politics every day, but in the past, it was politics every five years.

SS: Going back to the hotel analogy, some people may actually feel more like hotel employees, rather than hotel guests.

ST: Then I would like to send them to neighbouring countries, so that they can see who employees are and who guests are. This urge to keep making comparisons is a symptom of a disease, of this entitlement mentality that we have.

Singaporeans keep benchmarking against the politicians, instead of with people in similar circumstance such as in Africa or China. Then we would have seen that we started off worse, but are better off now. If you are an Olympian but you compare yourself with Superman, you will never be satisfied. I remember, when I was in primary school, I cried because I had no shoes. But I stopped when I saw a man with no legs.

If we import a worker with a pay three times lower, then we should not feel upset but feel lucky. Jobs are not being taken away, but jobs are won. It is the value system that needs work.

If I may add, Singapore is the best place in the world to be poor. There are many channels of help available in the system. But it is the toughest place to be in for the middle class.

SS: In the meritocratic society that Singapore has become, where everyone is expected to work hard for his own living and help himself, is there even a place for philanthropy?

ST: I would argue that it is because of meritocracy that there is space for philanthropy. And in a meritocratic society, people give based on everybody doing the best they can, rather than achieving a certain standard or benchmark. For instance, I don't expect a blind man to be a sharpshooter.

So in this society, those who can, have the responsibility to help those who can't. It is an obligation more than an act of generosity. In fact, it is an actual accountability to the system that has allowed you to excel in the first place. In many places where meritocracy is absent—royalty for instance—birthright and contacts get you places.

So it is a system that allows the strong to help the weak towards a more inclusive society. But this doesn't give the weak an entitlement. This is why I am fiercely against calling beneficiaries clients. Because then, this gives them a right and changes the whole context and psychology of service.

SS: But in a rights-based approach which is advocated by the social sector, don't the strong have a duty to help as much as the weak have a right?

ST: When we talk about rights of the vulnerable, we are saying that everybody deserves a chance to be helped, but they should not be provided for if they can help themselves. If a middle-aged couple living in a condominium refuses to downgrade to pay for their child's cochlear implant, then we need to ask hard questions about the parameters of help. A vulnerable group has a right to assistance up to a basic level, but beyond that, it is an entitlement.

I reiterate that we should not remove the suffering, but we must journey with them to overcome the suffering. And the vulnerable should be willing to make that journey in the first place.

SS: Based on your experience in both sectors, how can the social sector benefit from the business sector? For instance, do you think hybrid models such as social enterprise can pave the way for a thriving social sector?

ST: I think we have overplayed the social enterprise card.

For starters, the social sector never alleviates poverty. The psyche of many social workers is about delivering help, instead of enabling those they are helping. So we need to change that.

Second, being enterprising or entrepreneurial is a skill that can be employed by everybody, even by the government. Many of our early leaders, for instance, exhibited those skills. In a way, they ran Singapore like a social enterprise.

It also depends on what your definition of social enterprise is. For me, a social enterprise needs to be, firstly, an enterprise. It needs to be viable, self-sustaining and successful. Therefore, I have to say that social enterprise is more an exception than the norm. Many people see social enterprise as a form of aid, but that is built on a failing model. Elements such as subsidies and job creation are just part of the package.

Also, not every area can be enterprising. For example, education cannot be mainly provided by a social enterprise as it should be an enabler. Therefore, it should be made available to all, despite its cost. Healthcare, too, is infrastructure-based and should not only be provided for by a social enterprise. There are successful social enterprises, but they are the exception.

SS: What about the other areas of cross-sector fertilisation or sharing?

ST: We need to steal as many businessmen into the social sector as possible. Problem-solving is in the businessman's DNA and that is one thing he can help the social sector with. And he can contribute more with his brainpower and time, rather than just money.

But successful entrepreneurs always get placed in posts that don't need them as much. These posts may be status-based, but they do not really utilise the entrepreneur's talent. It's a paradox actually. If you are a businessman who has

earned a million dollars, that is your reward already—you don't need an ambassadorship as another reward.

We have to make the social sector more attractive for business people by not making it an unsavoury place to go to. If the politicians don't volunteer, why should the businessmen volunteer? It should start with the political leadership volunteering—beyond gracing events as Guests-of-Honour.

The government places talented people in statutory boards and the like where their role is often not to rock the boat. I find this illogical. Why can't we have 20 percent of each group—entrepreneurs, Public Service Commission Scholars and President Scholars—serve in the social sector?

The government is struggling to build this sector. It has become a very unsexy sector, especially after the National Kidney Foundation case. Possibly it is because this sector lacks stature. I took issue with the government when they referred to volunteers as being mostly amateurs because by saying so, they are running down the volunteers.

In a nutshell, the government approach and policies actually work against the social sector, intentionally or otherwise. It is disadvantaging the social sector.

SS: So people are generally rewarded for their positions, and not for the work they do?

ST: Yes. We recognise success more than we would recognise those who serve the community.

But I don't deny that people do work hard and deserve their reward. I am saying some forms of successes are not adequately recognised. Why, for example, do we celebrate and give an Olympic medal to a table tennis star but we do not do the same for a mother who raises many foster children or for a long-serving volunteer? Both activities require Olympian efforts.

SS: Back in 2007, you were called an "entrepreneurial cowboy" when you launched a bid to remove some high-profile board of directors from the publicly listed Yellow Pages. Do you think there is a need, in some instances, for the "non-profit cowboy"?

ST: "Cowboy" has a bad connotation. It implies that someone is careless and shoots from the hip. And that is what the press had brandished me with then. I would not like to encourage the use of that word. What I do is I speak my mind.

And if you ask me if the people space needs more voices, then I will say yes. Government will be better off with a strong civil society. If we had a strong civil society, then the most recent General Elections might have been a different story because the many issues that were raised could have been dealt with at the community level. For instance, if a resident thinks that a nursing home in his neighbourhood would bring the price of his property down, then civil society could step in and set the record straight. This way, the politicians don't need to deal with this discourse and lose political points.

On style, I don't think there is a need for an adversarial approach to change. If it is a lawless environment, then yes, cowboys are needed. But if the place is in order, then we need innovators. Here, our problem is more about the fact that people do not keep on refreshing their discovery. They are using what they already know and keep designing based on old knowledge. We must not be afraid of ourselves. We must trust ourselves to explore and implement new and less-known ideas.

SS: The media paints two sides of you. One is the hard-hitting and aggressive "cowboy." The other one is charming and quiet. Which one are you in the social sector?

ST: It's very hard to answer this objectively. But what I hope is that in whichever space I go to, I am being myself. And that has to include responding appropriately, not acting because I want to be someone else or seek to get hurt, but responding because the issue needed to be responded to in that way. So if it is necessary to get aggressive, I will. It is important to have beliefs worth fighting for and living for.

This is how I see it. Singapore is my home and not just a house I live in. A house is just a structure, no matter how well it is built. A home has a soul. Singapore is unique to me and a home worth protecting, worth fighting for and worth making an even better place for generations to come. For progress, we need to be willing to forego practices that are not fundamental to our being, even if sometimes it is uncomfortable to do so.

But it is all for nothing if we only build a house. We must protect and keep our core values that are the foundation that we build on; the values that makes us a community, a nation. We must not lose this sense of belonging and the bond as a people. Owning our homes and being well provided for do not in themselves give us that sense of belonging and bond. In fact, an over-emphasis of these will actually erode this.

So for this, I am willing to fight and to give of myself. It is a real privilege to find a home. I believe we are among the luckiest and must not take this for granted.

SS: A final question: what would you say is the one thing about the social sector that needs transformation?

ST: The mindset of what is the social sector. My fear is we think that everything can be solved and everything must be managed. This is a very dangerous mindset. As a nation, if you raise the people up as children, they will remain children. But if you raise them as adults, then they will act as adults. In all this, empathy and compassion should be the pivot—it's not about what you have but what you give.