

Singapore banking dynasty gives back through charitable family foundation

By Sharanjit Leyl
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In the midst of Singapore's looming skyline stands a lone 1930s mansion. Stark white in the bright equatorial sun, its original 19th century style now has a startling addition - a 20-story glass-and-steel residential tower cantilevered over it.

This is the Tan Chin Tuan mansion, named after the Singaporean who lived in it for almost half a century until his death in 2005.

A captain of industry, he was the man behind one of Singapore's largest banks, Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation.

Having hobnobbed with everyone from royalty to the Rockefellers, Mr Tan not only had a formidable reputation for business, he was also one of the island's best known philanthropists.

Since 2005 the foundation bearing his name has been housed in the restored mansion and run by his family.

Pet projects

His granddaughter, Chew Gek Hiang, estimates hundreds of millions of dollars have gone to charitable causes since 1976 when the foundation was first formed.

She meets her siblings and her mother, who chairs the foundation, once a month in the mansion to seek consensus in deciding which projects to give to.



Accompanied by a three-month-old stray puppy she's fostering, Ms Chew gave me a tour of the mansion where she grew up.

The large veranda, where she and her siblings breakfasted with her grandfather every morning, once held a menagerie of the family's pets, from parrots to several dogs.

It has now transformed into an austere meeting area, a long table flanked with chairs where visitors and would-be beneficiaries pitch their causes.

This isn't always easy. Ms Chew says that the board of the foundation has exacting standards in choosing who they give money to.

"A lot of beneficiaries when they approach us are asked: 'can you justify what you need the funds for? Do you have measurable key performance indicators? What is the impact, either to your society, or to people in general?'"

"And if they can't answer that, we'll say: 'we're so sorry, but you really need to re-look at your project because if you can't convince us, how can it be sustainable?'"

She says her family wants their contributions to have a "rippling effect". They seek out charitable projects that are sustainable and will continue to benefit beyond their involvement.

They all have different interests, her mother, an eye doctor, often goes on medical missions abroad. Her older sister gives to the arts, and her brother to children's charities.

Among Ms Chew's pet projects is her devotion to animal welfare. She's passionate about sterilising stray dogs to control their population and to reduce aggression so they don't pose a danger to the public.

Singapore philanthropists



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Mr Tan wasn't Singapore's only well-known philanthropist.

His contemporaries, the businessmen Lee Kong Chian, Lien Ying Chow and the movie making Shaw Brothers, Run Me and Run Run, set up similar foundations in the decades before Singapore emerged as a developed economy, when it was a younger and poorer country.

These men were influenced by the philanthropy of the Southern Chinese clans who came to Singapore in the 19th century to find their fortunes.

Associations were formed to allow richer clan members help hardworking new immigrants with housing and other financial needs.

The inhabitants of today's Singapore, with its gleaming skyline and efficient infrastructure, are among the world's wealthiest. Singapore's GDP per head of population stands at more than \$43,000 according to the World Bank.

It also has the third-highest percentage of millionaire households, behind Qatar and Switzerland, according to the Boston Consulting Group.

But when it comes to charity, Singaporeans don't score so well. The World Giving Index, compiled by the Charities Aid Foundation, claims to be the largest study ever carried out into charitable behaviour around the globe.

Singapore is ranked 64th out of 153 countries in terms of the percentage of the population who give money, volunteer their time or help strangers - well behind its regional counterparts Myanmar, the Philippines and Indonesia.



Chew Gek Hiang puts this down to the fact that Singapore prosperity has made poverty invisible, making fostering a charitable spirit harder.

"Singapore is a very affluent society, we don't really need the same sort of care and attention as in 1976, so the objectives of the foundation has evolved since then," she says.

'Personal interest'

One of them is to cast its net beyond Singapore. At a recent tea-time gathering of beneficiaries at the mansion, 25-year-old Vietnamese music student Tran Thanh Xuan says she owes a debt to the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation for helping her pursue her music studies in Singapore.

They've offered her a scholarship worth more than \$10,000, which covers half the cost of her studying music at one of Singapore's fine art schools. The foundation in return expects her to give back to the local community by working with under-privileged kids.

Ms Chew has sound advice for would-be philanthropists: take first hand interest in your endeavours. She recalls how her grandfather would visit senior citizen homes during the Chinese Lunar New Year and Christmas holidays, making sure that the dinners he supplied were suitable.

"So the first thing he'd ask is, do they need to chew a lot? Because obviously with old people, chewing was an issue, so he said it had to be soft, and it had to be palatable and it couldn't be too much because they wouldn't appreciate it.

"I was so amazed that he was so attentive to these details," she told me.

"He used to remind us that if you want to do something well, you must pay attention to it, you must take personal interest, because if you want your beneficiaries to appreciate it, then the care you take would be much appreciated... if it's a slipshod job, then they realise that you don't really care too."
