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# Heroes Of Philanthropy: Singapore's Laurence Lien Seeks to Make Giving A Regional Movement



Lien and his son visiting a village in China in 2013 as part of a project to provide drinking water.



Forbes Staff , Contributor

**By Jane A. Peterson**

Singapore scion Laurence Lien—cofounder of the new [Asia Philanthropy Circle](#)—wears the term “radical philanthropist” well. At age 45 this grandson of a banking tycoon is determined to change the face of Asian giving, taking it from an individual endeavor to a vibrant collaborative movement that spans the region. “For Asia this is the right time,” he says, noting that Asia’s myriad ills often stem from poverty and poor governance. “Wealth has now passed to the second generation and, rather than checkbook giving, this generation wants to be more strategic, but we are struggling.”

His solution is APC, envisioned as a place for peers to exchange views, a receptacle of collective insight and a vehicle for coordinated action—devoid of commercial interests. “It sounds like a no-brainer,” emphasizes Lien, “but everyone thinks their problems and their approaches to solving them are unique. They assume the differences are too difficult to make collaboration work. They are not.”

Case in point: donors’ futile building of toilets in poor rural areas—projects that continue to fail if they are not supplemented with proper community training to overturn ingrained habits. If donors would share such experiences, he says, they could eliminate waste and multiply the impact.

[Click here for more from this issue's Heroes Of Philanthropy](#)

To kick-start collaboration in the region and harness “collective intelligence,” Lien and Mathias Terheggen, APC’s chief operating officer, have been criss-crossing Asia since January, looking for prospective APC members—like-minded philanthropists who regularly give to various causes. “We are looking for the outliers,” says Lien, “those collaborators who have the right mind-set.”

“Asia is missing a coordinated voice for philanthropy,” notes Terheggen. “There’s no [Bill Gates](#) to form public opinion. Innovation in Asia is often a Western model copy-pasted into the region.”

Still, in the philanthropy universe the voice of Laurence Lien carries weight. The Lien Foundation in Singapore, which he has chaired since 2009, disburses some \$9 million annually to three main causes: elder care and early childhood education in Singapore, as well as water and sanitation throughout the region. His late grandfather Lien Ying Chow launched the foundation in 1980 with nearly half his wealth from Overseas Union Bank, which he founded in 1947. It’s known for transparency and innovative projects that the Singapore government often builds on. “We must do what governments are less good at doing,” stresses Lien, who made the 2010 Heroes of Philanthropy list. “Try new things. Take a long-term view. Pool risks. Share successes and failures with the world.” Then, he predicts, governments will pick the winning models and take them forward.

APC is the brainchild of Lien and cofounder Stanley Tan, chief executive of Global Yellow Pages, who spent six years together leading Singapore’s National

Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre, one of the few intermediaries in Asia that promote giving. Both men felt the time was ripe for collaborating on a pan-Asian scale to solve complex regional problems. “We realized that the existing nonprofit infrastructure is fairly poor,” observes Lien. “There is also a lack of trust in charities. In many Asian countries there’s a cynicism about philanthropy. The public thinks it’s all p.r. and marketing—people getting something out of it. A bit more transparency would help.”

So far the pair have signed up 19 paying members. Annual dues will fund an APC secretariat to support members, develop strategies and generally “connect the dots” and “lubricate the links” of collaboration.

Lien appears pleased. The number is just shy of the first-year goal of 20, and nearly a fifth of the way to a five-year target—and group limit—of 100. “We hope members will be role models,” he says, “willing to come to our meetings with openness and humility.”

Later this month he will host APC’s first meeting, at the Singapore family villa of his grandfather. On the agenda: building community and discussing what projects members want to pursue—and how much funding they are willing to contribute. As APC expands, he envisions subgroups organized by country, issue and approach.



*“The social teachings of the Church are a guiding light to me,” says Lien.*

Lien hopes APC members will work together on a range of interests, including education, entrepreneurship, the arts and culture. He wants ideas to “pollinate” across borders, with donors developing best practices. He also wants follow-up, with the impact of projects properly measured.

Early APC entrants, in roughly equal numbers, hail from Singapore, Indonesia and China/Hong Kong, while one member comes from the Philippines and another from Malaysia. They include Indonesian philanthropist Cherie Nursalim (a Hero of Philanthropy in 2009), who is on the APC board. Other names are private.

Though Lien foresees members coming from 22 countries, he acknowledges that his search in South Korea and Japan, where philanthropy is largely corporate, may be more difficult. He also acknowledges that Asian philanthropists are far from matching their American counterparts in terms of giving levels. "Hopefully we can develop an Asian style of philanthropy and also be a model for the West in collaborative giving," he says.

Lien is well versed in taking a contrarian point of view. FORBES ASIA estimates his extended family's wealth at \$1.35 billion, but he lives the lifestyle of a common man, driving his nine-year-old Honda Civic Hybrid to the small APC office in the no-frills Tanglin [International](#) Centre, a hub for international nonprofits that Singapore established in 2010. "I have no problems working anywhere," he explains, noting his life philosophy is faith-driven. "Growing up, I was fairly insulated from the trappings of wealth. The social teachings of the [Catholic] Church are a guiding light for me."

Wedged between his intern and his COO, Lien works from a simple desk with a phone, computer and 12 neatly placed boxes of name cards. "I have different boxes for different countries," he explains. "Certainly, the warmer the lead, the higher up in the stack they go."

By December Lien expects to clock 20 road trips on behalf of APC. When asked whether he's having fun, he responds, "Absolutely. It's fascinating on every front."

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