

■ THE EPOCH TIMES INTERVIEW

A BETTER ASIA THROUGH PHILANTHROPY

Q & A with
Laurence Lien,
co-founder &
CEO of Asia
Philanthropy
Circle (APC)

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By Epoch Times Staff

Laurence Lien, co-founder and CEO of Asia Philanthropy Circle (APC), a non-profit platform for Asian philanthropists, envisions “A better Asia through Philanthropy”.

His most recent endeavour – Asia Philanthropy Circle – seeks to develop “a distinct Asian brand of philanthropy” through an exclusive membership platform geared towards convening Asian philanthropists to exchange, share and coordinate philanthropic intelligence and capacity to “accelerate the public good in Asia”.

The stalwart advocator of philanthropy in Singapore was also the CEO of Singapore’s National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) from 2008 to 2014. The former Nominated Member of Parliament often championed for the social sector and civil society during his term of office from 2012 to 2014.

The scion of the illustrious Lien family also chairs the Community Foundation of Singapore (CFS) and Lien Foundation, the latter of which was started by his late grandfather, Dr George Lien Ying Chow, a banker and hotelier, in 1980. He has taken over the reins of leadership in the Lien Foundation since 2009, and has professionally turned it into one of the most well-managed and transparent foundations in Singapore.

So what is an Asian brand of philanthropy?

In this interview, Laurence Lien gives a glimpse into why it is important for Asian philanthropists to join up efforts to work on issues together, the challenges of building a collaborative network, and the need for Asian philanthropy to be more strategic to address Asia’s social challenges.

1. How would you describe the state of philanthropy in Asia? What are its strengths and its shortcomings?

Philanthropy has long roots in Asian culture and traditions, although the motivations here might be different from other parts of the world. Some Asians are quieter in their giving, believing that it would be wrong to seek attribution for their contributions.

Many are concerned with legacy building and using philanthropy to pass on family values to their next generations, family being very important to Asians. Faith-motivated giving is also very common in this part of the world.

In many Asian countries, the role of philanthropists in society can still grow very significantly. The size of giving is still modest compared to the capacity to give. This is partly because the non-profit sector is still relatively underdeveloped and philanthropic resources cannot be developed quickly, and partly because many successful business families are only just entering a more mature phase of wealth creation and thinking beyond the business.

Asian philanthropy needs to be more strategic. Currently, it is still quite ad-hoc and focused on low hanging fruits like education and religious giving. In addition, due to the nascent state of the industry, there is a lack of professional talent to assist the philanthropists, which is an area we are actively trying to address.

We do see that in recent years, there has been a rise in new philanthropists who are interested to make a big difference in targeted ways. Because strategic philanthropy is relatively new in Asia, there is room for it to leapfrog and develop without baggage from the past. Progressive philanthropists can learn quickly from successful models and cases globally and leapfrog past their mistakes or learnings.



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2. What are the philanthropic networks in Asia that you are involved in? Can you describe each of their purpose briefly?

There are not that many philanthropic networks in Asia, which is why I co-founded the Asia Philanthropy Circle (APC) early last year. The circle brings Asian philanthropists who are keen to collaborate and work on issues together: they exchange knowledge and learn from each other’s work, and replicate successful models across borders.

After working on social issues for years, we recognise that even though the countries are different, the human condition is the same and problems are usually similar in nature. Hence, instead of reinventing the wheel, it is much more effective to pool resources together, tap into our different strengths and address the multitude of problems together.

There are other networks like the Asian Venture Philanthropy Network (AVPN), which is a platform for a much wider funder base, including corporates, private banks, government agencies, and they exchange industry knowledge on a broader spectrum.

On a smaller scale, there has also been an uptake on collective giving – like the SVP networks in China, Collective Impact groups in Malaysia, Hong Kong – which all look at approaching systemic problems collaboratively.

3. In your interview with Caroline Hartnell for Alliance Magazine (May 1, 2015), you say that you want to “mobilise philanthropists in Asia to have greater impact, to be more collaborative, to create our own Asian brand of philanthropy”. Your initiative, the Asia Philanthropy Circle, also aims to provide a “safe space” for individual philanthropists “to open up and explore collaboration”.

a) Why is collaboration and network building important for you in making Asia philanthropy more effective?

Network building is important because our conviction is that there is a lot of good practice that already exists in Asia, some that are more appropriate to the Asian context than solutions from outside. NGOs, including foundations, should not have to keep reinventing the wheel. The exchange among members, who are all significant philanthropic players, can result in greater spread and adoption of good practice.

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lows philanthropists to join up efforts to tackle more social challenges that are too large or complex for individual philanthropists to take on. It helps channel resources to risky, long-term projects.

b) What are the barriers to more collaboration/ network building in Asian philanthropy?

The lack of a collaborative mindset is the first challenge. Philanthropists generally do not collaborate easily, as they are used to being in full control of their projects, and express their own values and personality through them. If they are merely joining APC or any other network looking for personal benefits and joining only when there is a 100% match between the project and their needs, they would not make good members.

Collaboration requires people thinking about the broader societal good and impact that they can achieve jointly that is much more than them working individually. This requires not only trust and mutual accountability with the community, but also a willingness to jump in even if one’s personal needs are not fully met.

Finally, good collaboration takes time, and requires participants to share ownership and be continually engaged for the long term. Philanthropists can delegate the implementation work to their staff, but they have to be hands-on enough to provide the leadership and to help work through the kinks and resistance that will inevitably emerge from any project that is worth doing.

c) What is your vision/understanding of an “Asian brand of philanthropy”? Why is it needed? How can philanthropy support infrastructure or philanthropic networks help accomplish this?

An Asian brand is needed because the context is different. While Asia remains diverse, it is common in many countries to see a close nexus among family, philanthropy and business. Family legacy, passing values and philanthropy down the generation, is highly desired.

Civil society is generally weak and community-driven initiatives are few. Hence, many philanthropic institutions provide direct services, rather than give grants. Given the circumstances, we need to evolve solutions that are appropriate and effective.

Asian culture is also more collectivist. There is an opportunity for us in Asia to create an Asian way of solving social problems that are more collaborative among different philanthropists and in close partnership with governments and the private sector.

In most Asian countries, working with the government is important, regardless of whether the government is effective, as governments tend to be more dominant than in the West.

Another opportunity is for philanthropy to work on systemic issues through the funding of action research and advocacy to create new models that shape a field’s understanding and inform government policy. Many governments throughout Asia struggle to innovate and experiment in new areas.

Fundamentally, we believe that change agents are needed from all sectors of society to address Asia’s social challenges. We believe that strategic and engaged philanthropists can be those change agents. For this to happen, philanthropists need a respected, forward-thinking and innovative central body, like the APC, to continuously identify, recruit and harness their collective intelligence and efforts for collaborative and catalytic action in Asia.