



# Magazine

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# Young Asians form a giving circle: Experimenting with philanthropy by learning from one another

Rob John <https://about.me/robjohn>



Rob John

Over the last several years, I and my colleagues at NUS Business School were curious about how philanthropy in Asia is adapting to new opportunities arising from the growth of social entrepreneurship<sup>1</sup>, and the intergenerational flow of family wealth.

**A**mongst the actors in this region pursuing innovative philanthropy are corporate foundations<sup>2</sup>, wealth managers and individuals who give collectively through giving circles. In Asia there is a strong tradition of businesses and wealth passing along family generations. Today's 'next gen' philanthropists in their 20s and 30s are steeped in family-giving traditions while also exposed to contemporary, western practices through education and travel abroad. In this case study<sup>3</sup> we see how a group of young Asians formed their own peer group to experiment with giving models and learn from each other.

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## The 20/20 Social Impact Leaders' Group

Simon Feng Ou grew up in Taiwan, was educated in the US and spent time with his family's sports equipment business in China before pursuing a career in the sustainable energy sector. En Lee is a Singaporean, who having spent over a decade in London and Hong Kong working in finance and law, has spent the

last six years pioneering impact investing in Asia. Meeting at the UBS global philanthropy forum in Switzerland, Ou recalls how he and Lee "lamented how few philanthropy events catered for the younger generation". Moreover, very few of them discussed innovative approaches like social entrepreneurship and impact investing. Deciding to change that, Ou and Lee gathered together other like-minded individuals in their 20s and 30s who wanted their giving to create meaningful and sustainable impact. Ou says: "In 2013 we started a group called UBS 20/20 Social Impact Leaders' Group hoping to engage next-generation leaders through peer-to-peer learning for the



purposes of collective action, but also we wanted to have an issue-centric approach to provide an effective solution.” After several workshops together, the head of philanthropy for UBS in Asia Pacific, suggested the group form a giving circle in partnership with UBS Optimus Foundation (an independent grant-making foundation set up by the bank in 1999 with a focus on child well-being).

The wider purpose of the 20/20 group is to support and incubate at least 20 new ‘social impact leaders’ in Asia by 2020, ‘empowered by expertise, resources and networks, to create positive, sustainable social impact through action’. The giving circle is the group’s first collective action. The group’s 20 or so members, living in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and China, pooled their funds together and committed to attend at least three of the four physical meetings held each year.

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### The first project: China

For an international group of busy individuals in early-career, the relationship with UBS Optimus Foundation was valuable in providing focus and structure. “The Foundation has expertise in early childhood development, so working with their advice we narrowed down to a shortlist of three non-profit projects we might support in that field, finally choosing a grassroots organisation in Daliangshan, a mountainous area in Sichuan Province, China. As this was our first Impact Circle project, we decided to start with a philanthropic grant but be proactively involved and seek accountability in outcomes,” says Ou. The UBS Optimus Foundation also helped the group by holding workshops on project design, grant management and impact assessment, and has matched project funds raised by the 20/20 group members. The project aims to provide early childhood development to the Yi ethnic minority community in the Daliangshan through a ‘public-private philanthropy partnership’ involving local government and grassroots organisations with academic and international partners.

### Learning together

A site visit to Daliangshan was organised in late 2014 giving the group an authentic on-the-ground experience and understanding what the project aims to achieve. Group members originally intended to be actively engaged as the project progressed, but Ou admits, “it has been difficult to coordinate all the different parties, so we rely more on UBS Optimus Foundation providing us with project updates during our quarterly meetings”. Despite the logistical challenges, he feels it has been a more positive, insightful experience than just passive giving alone: “Although it’s been time consuming and harder than we originally anticipated, it’s been more fun and collaborative, and has given us a detailed analysis of the problem and the solution; we’re also much more willing to go on a site visit when part of a group.”

The giving circle’s lead in supporting a grassroots organisation resulted in other potential donors showing interest in continuing and expanding this partnership with UBS Optimus Foundation. There is also encouraging policy news with the Chinese Government announcing US\$370 million investment in early child development in Daliangshan, including a new teacher training college. The local charity supported by the giving circle is now officially registered as an NGO, and all early childhood development centres in the remote mountains now have legal status and are recognised by the government, removing a big threat for both the local charity and the children.

### Policy impact

It is early days for the group, but Ou feels some valuable lessons have already been learned: “Despite coordination difficulties, we were able to keep ...the members of the group fully engaged and updated on project progress. The positive changes in Government policy mean that more than 30% of Yi children in Daliangshan have access to early childhood development centres or day care. With all these positive outcomes, it has been an amazing journey for all of us. We hope that our next project’s timeline will be longer than 12 months so we can see it develop from start to finish.”

### Nurturing the next philanthropy leaders

Simon Ou’s career in renewable energy required a relocation to California and so he passed his responsibilities to another group member, 28-year-old Alvin Li, from Hong Kong. While training to

be a physician, the compelling vision of social entrepreneurship led Li to give up medical studies and launch multiple charity financing and social initiatives, including Givo, which uses technology and social media to help charities raise funds from foundations and individuals; the Kommon Goods is a Hong Kong-based lifestyle brand that produces eco-friendly items such as metal straws, bamboo toothbrushes, bamboo utensils and reusable bottles for hotels and as corporate gifts.

### Conclusion

I know from my own research in Asia and from studies in Europe and the US, that joining a giving circle has a profoundly positive impact on the giving habits of its members – they become better informed about social issues and philanthropy, they give more generously and do so more strategically. The 20/20 group has similarly benefitted from collective giving, peer learning and a strategic partnership with an established corporate foundation. Their experiences provide one model for engaging the next generation of philanthropists in Asia.

This article is based on a case study written by the author, available at: <http://givingcircles.asia/case-studies-details.aspx?cs=12>

<sup>1</sup> *Innovating Times for Asian Philanthropy*, Rob John, *Philanthropy Impact*, Issue 9, Autumn 2015, page 22

<sup>2</sup> *Innovative Corporate Philanthropy in Asia*, Rob John, *Philanthropy Impact*, Issue 17, Autumn 2017, page 6

<sup>3</sup> *The original version of case study was first published in 'Corporate Philanthropy in Asia: Innovations that unlock the resources of business for the common good.'*, by Rob John, Audrey Chia and Ken Ito, *Asia Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and Philanthropy*, NUS Business School, Singapore (2017), page 49.

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