Re-distributive Philanthropy and the Chinese Australian Diaspora

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Abstract

The discipline of sociology has paid relatively scant regard to either the actualities or the potential of voluntary giving of funds as a process capable of making a contribution to addressing social inequalities. While the literature that does exist includes arguments identifying aspects of elite philanthropy as being essentially self-serving (Ostrower, 1995; Odendahl, 1989) it also includes those who contend that giving is fundamental to social cohesion (Komter, 2007) and that redistribution is one of the most ancient forms of philanthropy (Frumkin, 2006; Payton, 1988). In very broad terms, the redistributive aspects of philanthropic giving have been present to varying degrees across the centuries and across myriad nations, cultures and religions. The prevailing western philanthropic processes have included both amelioration, in addressing acute needs in the moment, and transformation, in addressing the underlying causes of social inequalities. The extent to which such western processes are universal however remain largely untested. This is of particular significance in Australia where the ethnic and cultural composition is quickly changing and where many residents no longer come from western traditions. The 2011 Census reveals that over 866,000 Australian residents identified themselves as having Chinese ancestry. Of these, 318,969 were born in China, making China the 4th most common country of birth for Australians behind Australia, Britain and New Zealand (ABS 2012). This paper begins to address the almost entirely absent understanding of the similarities and differences in the normative influences over the philanthropic attitudes of this the fastest growing Diaspora in Australia.

Key words: philanthropy, diaspora, Chinese, Australian, re-distribution

Introduction

Over the past decade there has been a heightened international interest in Diaspora philanthropy by sociologists and other social scientists (Dunn, 2004; Johnson, 2007; Riddle et al., 2008; Sidel, 2008; Baker and Mascitelli, 2011) and by those interested in the philanthropic possibilities associated with increasing financial capacity of Chinese Diaspora communities (Yuen and Ho, 2011; Morris, 2011; Menkhoff and Chang-Yau, 2010). The Chinese Diaspora is large, complex and globally diffuse. Despite its growing importance to the economy and culture of Australia, and many nations, studies to enhance knowledge and
understanding of the giving behaviours of this Diaspora are rare, and in Australia they are all but non-existent. Indeed, Sidel argues that there is a serious lack of research into and understanding of the giving behaviours of emerging diasporas in Australia given the important role they play in redistributive giving for “charitable, social, economic and other” purposes amongst others (2008: 3). The paucity of scholarly research is compounded by the lack of reliable data on giving in Australia capable of shedding any light on diaspora giving.

Chinese in Australia

The history of Chinese in Australia dates back to the very foundations of New South Wales as a colony of the British. While early records are incomplete, and early immigration was overwhelmingly from the British Isles, there were exceptions. To satisfy labour shortages in the colony small numbers of Chinese came to Australia from the 1820s onwards. With the end of convict transportation in the 1840s, the inflow of Chinese resumed and was boosted further by the gold rush of the 1850s which resulted in thousands of Chinese, mostly from Canton and Hong Kong, making their way to Australia. By 1861 the number of Chinese in Australia had reached over 38,000 (Choi, 1975: 22). At 3.3 per cent of the Australian population at the time, this was the highest concentration of Chinese in Australian history.

The introduction of the “White Australia” legislation in 1901 saw the number of Chinese gradually reduce to some 9,000 by 1947 (Choi, 1975). The White Australia policy began to be moderated after World War II by a number of incremental changes over the following decades though it was not until 1973 that the policy was finally abolished (Jupp, 1995). The real impact came in 1975 with the admission of Indo-Chinese refugees, “boat people”, fleeing from the War in Vietnam. A new generation of Chinese immigrants to Australia saw significant numbers of non-Cantonese speakers arriving in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Following the Tiananmen Square protests of June 1989, Prime Minister Hawke granted permanent residency to many of the Chinese students in Australia. Since that time there has been a steady flow of immigrants from mainland China and Taiwan. The contemporary Chinese Diaspora in Australia is in practice as diverse as it is dynamic. The Chinese Diaspora is a description which applies broadly to ethnic Chinese (Ho & Coughlan, 1997), and in the case of Australia includes people who have come from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and Cambodia) who in turn come from a diverse array of regional, religious and social class backgrounds (Collins, 2002).

Chinese giving traditions and developments

In the Census of 2006, 61 per cent of China-born residents selected: “No religion” (relative to 24 per cent of the Australia-born). The Census did not provide Confucianism as one of the listed options. The small proportions of the China-born who identified as having a religion is in part a reflection on the relatively recent history of China and in part a reflection of alternative approaches to spirituality and guiding philosophies in China. Prior to the collapse of the imperial system in 1911, the institutions of giving in China were predominately clan-based lineage organizations which cared for the disadvantaged and took the lead role in responding to natural disasters. From the formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921 and particularly following the ascendency of Mao to its leadership in 1935, the role of the Party was all pervasive. While the Open Door Reforms of 1997 saw the re-emergence of community serving organisations in China, it was indeed a re-emergence. A considerable array of civil society organisations has long existed in traditional society in China, from
charitable halls and associations participating in poverty alleviation, through to multiple forms of cooperative associations involved in rural and communal economies, and neighbourhood mutual aid (Wang and Liu, 2009). Wealthy citizens have been active in Chinese history in responding to famine (Handlin Smith, 1998) and in the establishment of ‘benevolent societies’ the sixteenth century to help the poor in their communities (Handlin Smith, 1987).

The societal norms at play were largely based on the Five Cardinal Relationships which form the central organising principle of Confucian society: affection between parent and child; righteousness between ruler and subject; distinction between husband and wife; order between older and younger brothers; and sincerity between friends (Lo and Otis, 2003). Hsu (2008) argues that in order to understand how giving institutions functioned in pre-modern China, it is critical to understand the role played by material gifts and by favours. While in the West notions of giving with (self-serving) instrumentality in mind is deemed an inferior, tainted form of donor behaviour, in traditional Chinese society instrumentality is the point of the gift process and serves to strengthen rather than diminish relationships. According to Confucian philosophy, relationships between an individual and others come in three categories. First and foremost is family or kin; then pseudo-kin or friends; and strangers.

While Confucianism has been important to Chinese society, the ways in which this has shaped associated philanthropic institutions and practices remain a function of the particular social, cultural, economic and regulatory demands of the time (Handlin Smith, 1998; 1987). It would also be a mistake to think “the cultural toolkit of the average [contemporary] Chinese citizen … is made up solely of practices and concepts from Chinese Confucianism” (Hsu, 2008: 86).

Nevertheless, at its essence the tenets of Confucianism that inform Chinese approaches to giving and those of the Judeo-Christian approach do not in the first instance present as fundamentally similar. Whereas the Western tradition views philanthropy as essentially voluntary, altruistic and independent of the state, the traditional Chinese framework “idealizes giving to kin” (Hsu, 2008: 84) and is understood to be more obligatory, reciprocal and entirely consistent with the Confucian principle of righteousness between ruler and subject. Another and related influence on Chinese giving is that of guanxi. While the concept and practice of guanxi is increasingly familiar beyond the Chinese Diaspora, it was after more than a decade of ethnographic research in rural China that Yang framed the particularly incisive definition of the art of relationships, guanxixue, (1994: 6) as "the exchange of gifts, favors, and banquets; the cultivation of personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness".

Menkhoff and Chang-Yau (2010) argue that the values and associated practices that underpin Chinese society with its emphasis on family, clan and community are essentially communal in nature and consistent with the values of reciprocity in Western conceptions of philanthropy. Nevertheless, while the traditions and institutions of charitable giving are as ancient and honoured in Chinese society as they are in the West, westerners have historically failed to properly identify and acknowledge Chinese charitable traditions because of our own narrowly defined and simplistic notions about philanthropy (Handlin Smith, 1998) and the mono-cultural lens employed.

In contemporary China the changing nature of fundamentally redistributive giving was thrust into the public limelight and on to the policy agenda by the reaction of the many to the Wenchuan Earthquake of May 2008. This massive earthquake had a devastating impact on Sichuan and neighbouring provinces, resulting in nearly 70,000 deaths, the destruction of
nearly 8 million homes, and the evacuation of more than 15 million people. The tragedy resulted in an overwhelming response from the people of China “from every level of the social strata” (Zheng, 2009: 248) as well as from around the world. The speed and scale of the reaction, in terms of funds donated, volunteering and in terms of increased blood donations (Liu et al., 2010), took the nation by surprise and the response to this catastrophic event proved to be a major spur for the subsequent strengthening of China’s non-profit and philanthropic sectors (Wang and Liu, 2009; Wang and Xu, 2010). The Chinese Diaspora also responded significantly to this natural disaster and community need in their ancestral home.

The strong response of the Chinese Diaspora in Australia (Baker et al., forthcoming) is indicative of the philanthropic networks and practices that largely fly below the radar of mainstream philanthropic institutions in this country. Nevertheless, the attention of all in the philanthropic arena in Australia was secured in June 2010 when Dr Chau Chak Wing donated a total of $25 million the University of Technology in Sydney (UTS). In an exemplification of the importance of kin, Dr Chau’s son was studying architecture at UTS at the time that this donation of unprecedented scale was made. The actuality and potential of Chinese Diaspora philanthropy was not missed by the sector and its significance was reiterated when the development manager at UTS at the time (Melissa Smith) was awarded “Australian Fundraiser of the Year” and subsequently “Global Fundraiser of the Year” in 2011 (Johnson, 2011). In 2012 the first Chinese-born member of Parliament in Australia, Helen Sham-Ho (OAM) was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australian in recognition of her service to the parliament of New South Wales and in recognition of her effectiveness is raising funds from the Chinese community for causes - in both China and Australia. Sham-Ho’s effectiveness emphasises the importance of connectedness and community (pseudo-kin) to encouraging giving by members of the Chinese Diaspora. In her practice Sham-Ho also draws upon and is indicative of the advancement of Chinese Australians who are increasingly in positions of power and influence and numbering amongst the most economically successful of Australian entrepreneurs, as has so long been the case.

Chinese Australian Diaspora Philanthropy

As outlined above, along with much in contemporary China, the nature of private giving for public good is undergoing rapid change in that country. Whereas the Confucian hierarchy of kin, pseudo-kin and strangers would suggest a greater emphasis on the construction of bonding rather than bridging social capital and a corresponding cultural constraint on the extent to which giving might address social inequities beyond family and immediate community, the response of the Chinese to the 2008 earthquake is fundamentally of a similar nature to that of the Australian populace to fire and flood disasters in this country. The level of giving, the beneficiaries, the institutional forms and the normative values that underpin Chinese philanthropic giving are all in a state of dynamic transformation. To what extent is this relevant to the philanthropic giving attitudes and practices of the Chinese Diaspora in Australia? The answer in part may lie in the increasingly connected nature of contemporary Diaspora. As Hugo has identified, the nature of access to home communities has been transformed in recent years: "One of the differences between modern Diaspora and those of history is the revolution in information and communication on the one hand, and the cheapening and speeding up of international travel on the other" (2006: 118).

The extent to which new Australian residents are able to maintain and indeed to strengthen relationships and ties with their community of origin is unprecedented. While European
immigrants to Australia in the post-War era were often only able to make one or two trips back to their country of origin throughout their working lives, in the contemporary transnational world, new entrants to Australia (and other countries) are able to maintain and build upon intimate ties with family, community, business partners and others by social media, on-line news sources and indeed relatively regular exchange of visits. In addition, the re-emergence of China as a powerful political, economic and cultural force and the associated rise in the pride that comes with being Chinese has in itself provided a basis for maintaining and strengthening ties from family and community, to institutions and business enterprises. What is not as apparent is the extent to which this new transnationalism and the associated strengthening of ties with communities of origin will impact on how this significant diaspora located in Australia go about their giving.

This paper has sought to establish the importance of understanding the philanthropic influences, attitudes and practices of the nation’s fastest growing Diaspora, Chinese Australians. The exploration involved gives rise to a further series of inter-related questions that warrant rigorous investigation. Two areas for further investigation are: 1) the nature and extent of Chinese Australian philanthropy; and 2) the influence of cultural interplay on giving practices. Both areas for further research would need to be informed by recognition of the diverse nature of this diaspora and of the wider Australian community. The former would serve to shed light on where and to what Chinese Australians direct their philanthropic attention and resources. The latter would illuminate the how and why of giving by the diaspora. Key questions that could be addressed under the theme of cultural interplay include the following. Do the different cultural traditions of the application of private funds for public good manifest themselves in different forms of philanthropic giving? Does time and the development of allegiances to one’s community of origin and one’s country of residence manifest in changing giving practices over time and is this evident in different approaches to giving by Australian born Chinese (ABCs) and the China-born? To what extent does the giving culture in Australia influence Diaspora giving practices, and to what extent does the reverse apply? Looking beyond the particular of the Australian context, a wider question to be addressed is the extent to which the giving culture and related cultural norms in any one country of residence results in giving practices by the Chinese Diaspora that are identifiably different from those of the Chinese Diaspora elsewhere.

References


