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Chinese Philanthropic Response to COVID-19 in the Malaysian Context

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Chinese Philanthropy in Malaysia

The Chinese came to the Malay Archipelago as early as the Han dynasty (BC202-AD220) (Xu, 1961) and their visits and relationships with the archipelago accelerated during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). While en route to the Western Ocean between 1405 and 1433, a fleet led by an envoy of the Ming dynasty, Admiral Cheng Ho, visited several times the Malacca Sultanate, which was centred in the modern-day state of Malacca, Malaysia. As a result, some Chinese chose to stay back in Malacca and married the locals. During the Qing dynasty (1636-1912), the government prohibited their citizens from leaving. However, this situation began to change when the “Convention of Peking” was signed by the Qing government after it was defeated by the joint forces of Great Britain and France. The treaty forced the Qing government to allow its citizens to leave China, and consequently some of them did and were recruited by foreign merchants to fulfil the workforce needed in the region of Southeast Asia. Hence, mass migration from China occurred and a large number of the Chinese started to arrive at the Malay Peninsula and became laborers in different sectors such as plantation and tin mining while some ventured into business. Some of them eventually became successful entrepreneurs. Along the way, philanthropy would become an important aspect of their everyday life. Many from this Chinese diaspora donated huge sums of money they had made to their motherland to support the Chinese government and to fight the war against Japan. Besides, various Chinese associations were formed, and it was through these associations that many philanthropic works were carried out by successful Chinese entrepreneurs to support fellow association members. Gradually, such philanthropic efforts were extended to other communities living in Malaya (Malaysia in 1963).

Meanwhile, in December 2019 after the novel human coronavirus disease COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China, it quickly spread worldwide and subsequently evolved into a global health and socioeconomic crisis so serious that it has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. As governments of the world are battling the pandemic, as well as the rising number of COVID-19 cases and death toll, it is at this critical juncture that such a humanitarian catastrophe of unprecedented scale and impact has put charities and philanthropy under the spotlight. In Malaysia, where the Chinese community is known for its philanthropic contributions, its members have remained committed to a string of philanthropic efforts not only to fight COVID-19, but also to help those affected by the coronavirus. It is within the aforementioned context that this paper aims to explore Chinese philanthropy in Malaysia from the 19th century to the present time, by taking as a point of departure its response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Since the practice of Chinese philanthropy in Malaysia is not new and dated back to the 19th century, this paper sets out to first present the various philanthropic efforts made or led by some prominent Chinese in the Malay Peninsula from the second half of the 19th century to post-independence Malaya/Malaysia. This part involved secondary research into the historical information. In the second part that explores Chinese Malaysian philanthropic response to COVID-19, the researchers would employ the content analysis technique. By examining various news sources in the period between March and December 2020, news articles on local philanthropic activities aimed at battling the coronavirus were identified through rounds of database searches. Among the keywords used in the search included “philanthropy,” “Malaysia” and their Chinese equivalent. Searches using those keywords yielded a total of 143 unique news articles. However, the researchers would use the qualitative

rather than quantitative approach to describe the forms and nature of the philanthropic activities, given that not all such activities made the news, and that certain activities might have received more news coverage than others.

Chinese Philanthropy in 19th Century

Chinese Philanthropy in the Malay Peninsula started as soon as after the Chinese had set foot in this part of the world. In the second half of the 19th century, prominent Chinese philanthropists such as Cheong Hong Lim, Tan Kim Seng, So Ah Chiang, Chung Keng Quee, Chin Ah Yam, Yap Ah Loy, Chan Sow Lin, Wong Ah Fook, and Tan Hiok Nee carried out considerable philanthropic works. Through their efforts, many schools, temples, hospitals, and other public amenities were built. For example, Yap Ah Loy was instrumental in funding many philanthropic works that eventually saw roads, houses and public amenities being built in Kuala Lumpur (Carstens, 1988). Besides, Tan Kim Seng donated 13,000 Straits Dollars to the Straits Settlements Government to build a proper water supply system (Chia, 2016). Meanwhile, Chan Sow Lin founded the Tung Shin Hospital in Kuala Lumpur (Khoo, 2011a). Other prominent Chinese philanthropists such as Loke Yew and Yap Kwan Seng respectively built the Confucius Secondary School and Victoria Institution (Liu, 2009; “Yap Kwan Seng,” 2010).

Chinese Philanthropy from 20th Century to Present Day

In the first few decades of the 20th century, many Chinese philanthropists in the Malay Peninsula responded and contributed to issues faced by China. However, their focus eventually changed to Malaya, after the latter gained independence from the British in 1957.

Pre-World War I Chinese Philanthropy

The Chinese community in the Malay Peninsula in the period of pre-World War I was concerned about various issues such as education. At the same time, they were also concerned about the political development back in their motherland of China. Often, they would donate large sums of money to render their support to the Qing government when it needed money to cover its expenses and debt repayment. One of prominent philanthropists who did so was Cheong Fatt Tze, a successful entrepreneur who had given support to resolve various educational issues that occurred in both the Malay Peninsula and China (Khoo, 2011b). During one of his trips back to China, Cheong donated money to establish a charitable foundation called “Yu Shan Tang.” When China lost in the Sino-Japanese war in 1894, Cheong donated 800,000 teals to rebuild the Chinese naval fleets (Xu, 2012). In 1900, he organised a charity movement to collect money to assist the victims of the Yellow River (*Huang He*) flood.

Besides, many Chinese philanthropists had also generously donated in support of both the Reformist and Revolutionist Movements in China. For example, when Kang Yu-wei reached Singapore in 1900 to promote the Reformist Movement and his ideas, he got the support of many famous Chinese philanthropists such as Lim Boon Keng and Khoo Seok Wan (Wee, 2010). Inspired by Kang Yu-wei and his student Liang Qi Chao, Khoo donated around 200,000 Straits Dollars to support the Reformist Movement (Zhuang, 2012). In order to better promote the idea of the movement,

Kang decided to develop some schools in the Malay Peninsula. For this matter, Lim, Khoo, and other Chinese philanthropists gave their support. As a result, many Chinese schools such as Singapore Chinese Girls' School, Chong Cheng School, and Tao Nan School in Singapore; Shih Chung School and Shang Wu School in Penang; Yuk Choy School in Ipoh, were built (Zhang, 2016).

Also, there were many Chinese philanthropists who supported the Revolutionist Movement. Cheong Fatt Tze had secretly supported the movement by giving Sun Yat-Sen 13,000 teals through his friend Hu Hanmin (Sha, 1991). After the revolution in 1911, Cheong once again donated to Sun a large amount of money. Other philanthropists such as Zhang Yongfu, Tan Chor Lam, and Goh Say Eng donated almost all their wealth in support of the movement (Lin & Zhang, 1991).

Between Post-World War I and Pre-World War II

After World War I, a new group of Chinese philanthropists emerged. Tan Kah Kee, Lim Peng Siang, and Aw Boon Haw were among them. As with the earlier Chinese philanthropists, they donated generously to the development of Chinese education in the Malay Peninsula. When World War II was about to erupt, they gave their support to China and sent large amount of money back to China.

Being the wealthiest Chinese entrepreneur in the Malay Peninsula at that time, Tan Kah Kee donated large sums of money to support Chinese education. Many schools such as the Anglo-Chinese School, Raffles Institution, Hwa Chong Institution, and many Chinese primary schools benefited from his donations (Chen, 2015). When the Japanese invaded China, Tan founded and led the Nan Yang Overseas Chinese Association (*Nan Qiao Zong Hui*) to collect donations from the Chinese in the Southeast Asian region to fight Japanese invasion. From 1937 to 1940, the association managed to donate close to 300 million Chinese Dollars to the Chinese government. His effort was supported by other Chinese philanthropists in the Malay Peninsula (Chen, 2016). According to a report by the Finance Ministry of Nanking Government, between 1937 and 1945, overseas Chinese had contributed to some 1.3 billion Legal Tender to the government, averaging 160 million per year. Legal Tender was the currency in circulation between November 4, 1935 and August 19, 1948 in olden China. Among the overseas Chinese, those from Southeast Asia had contributed the most ("Tan Kah Kee's outstanding contribution," n.d.).

Between Post-World War II and Pre-Independence Malaya

After World War II, Chinese philanthropists began to show more support to the Chinese community in Malaya. Among them were Tan Lark Sye and Lee Kong Chian. In 1953, Tan was the one to propose and push for the setting up of the Nan Yang University (Tan, 2005). Lee Kong Chian assisted by trying to finance the university. Other than supporting the Nan Yang University, Lee also provided financial support to build the first Tamil secondary school in Singapore and the first Islamic college in Malaya (Nor-Afidah, 2006).

From Post-Independence Period to Present Day

After Malaya gained independence in 1957, the Chinese philanthropists have continued their support to Chinese education, an area of utmost importance to the Chinese community. They have also actively supported activities that would uplift the

quality of life of not only members of the Chinese community, but those of other communities alike. Such philanthropic works have carried on even after Malaysia was formed in 1963. There are four prominent philanthropists from this period. The first one is Robert Kuok Hock Nien, currently the richest man in Malaysia. He frequently makes financial contributions to the needy communities both in Malaysia and abroad. For example, in 2004 he donated 50 million Chinese Yuan to the China Youth Development Foundation that initiated “Project Hope” through his company Yihai Kerry Investments Co., Ltd. In 2005, he provided financial support to the poor farmer families in China and assisted their children to complete their studies (Chi, 2014). In 2013, he donated 100 million Ringgit Malaysia (RM) to Xiamen University to enable the university to build its campus in Malaysia (“Robert Kuok donates,” 2014).

Another prominent Chinese philanthropist was Lim Goh Tong, who founded a family charitable fund in 1987 to provide financial assistance to charitable associations that need support (“Lim Goh Tong passes away,” 2007). Another well-known philanthropist in Malaysia is Yeoh Tiong Lay. Through his donation, Hin Hua High School, a Chinese Independent High School in Klang, Malaysia, was able to construct a new building to accommodate its students. He has also pledged his long-term, continuous support to others Chinese primary and secondary schools like SJK (C) Jalan Davidson (“Yeoh Tiong Lay,” 2014).

Chinese Malaysian Philanthropic Response to COVID-19

Malaysia’s philanthropic response to COVID-19 began as early as January 2020 before the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in the country. The Malaysian Rubber Export Promotion Council and the rubber gloves manufacturers in Malaysia, in a humanitarian drive led by then Primary Industries Minister Teresa Kok Suh Sim, had pledged to donate some 18 million pieces of medical gloves to Wuhan (Kaos Jr., 2020). Most of the founders of these glove companies are ethnic Chinese businessmen.

On 16 March 2020, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced that the federal government would be imposing a nationwide lockdown known as the Movement Control Order (MCO). By then, a total of 553 COVID-19 cases had been reported (“COVID-19 chronology,” 2020). Following the MCO, philanthropic activities to fight the pandemic had accelerated. There had been various funds set up to battle COVID-19; these included the National COVID-19 Fund managed by the National Disaster Management Agency, The Edge COVID-19 Equipment Fund and The Edge COVID-19 Health Care Workers Support Fund initiated by business and investment weekly *The Edge*, as well as those handled by local charitable foundations. A number of local and national foundations had readjusted their priorities to emphasise work in support of those affected by COVID-19.

Philanthropy by Chinese Charitable, Religious, and Cultural Organisations

Based on the 143 articles collected and content analysed, Chinese philanthropic activities to battle COVID-19 can be organised into several types. Among them, philanthropy done by Chinese charitable, religious, and cultural organisations seem to have been reported to a considerable extent. For the most part, their main role was to mobilise and gather donations, both monetary and material, to be used in the fight against the pandemic. Over the period from March to December 2020, one of the significant initiatives was led by Yayasan Sin Chew, which would

find itself collaborating with various Chinese religious organisations like Fo Guang Shan Malaysia, Best Wishes Foundation, Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA), and Chihui Tang KL, among others, for various charitable endeavours. Yayasan Sin Chew, a charitable foundation belonging to Malaysia's biggest Chinese newspaper *Sin Chew Daily*, has since its inception in 2000 initiated a slew of charitable efforts, with the latest one being the "Fight for Life, Action to Save" Donation Campaign aimed at assisting medical front-liners and underprivileged communities affected by the COVID-19 outbreak (Yayasan Sin Chew, 2021).

It is worth noting that the said collaboration led by Yayasan Sin Chew was not a one-time effort, but rather an iterative and continuous one involving a series of philanthropic drives that approached donations in a targeted manner. For instance, in March and April 2020, Yayasan Sin Chew would team up with Fo Guang Shan Malaysia (FGS) and BLIA separately, to donate personal protective equipment (PPE) to medical front-liners in Kluang and Segamat in the state of Johore ("Yayasan Sin Chew and Fo Guang Shan donate mask and protective clothing," 2020; "Yayasan Sin Chew and BLIA donate materials," 2020). In April 2020, Yayasan Sin Chew would focus its PPE donation to the Sarawak General Hospital ("Sin Chew donates supplies," 2020). Many of these charitable, religious, and cultural organisations that Yayasan Sin Chew had collaborated with, have their own, standalone charitable activities to support various causes, whether COVID-19-related or not. For example, Best Wishes Foundation, which prides itself on its official Facebook page as a Malaysian cultural institution that promotes cultural and philanthropic works in Malaysia, has several activities in place to assist underprivileged families, children, and individuals, including the aboriginal children in Malaysia. The series of collaborations had provided Yayasan Sin Chew and other partners with better synergy than if each party had tackled the cause on their own.

Philanthropy by Well-Known Chinese Public Figures

Besides, well-known individuals of Chinese ethnicity, almost all of whom are comprised of businessmen and investors from various sectors, had also contributed significantly to philanthropy during the research period. Some of these prominent public figures included the likes of Jeffrey Cheah Fook Ling, the founder and chairman of the Sunway Group, a Malaysian conglomerate operating in various industries with core businesses in property and construction; Vincent Tan Chee Yioun, the founder of a diversified conglomerate called Berjaya Corporation Berhad, which is listed on the Malaysian stock exchange, and Francis Yeoh Sock Ping of multi-disciplinary conglomerate YTL Corporation.

While some of the donations by these philanthropists were made through their respective companies or corporate foundations, in most cases they would make an appearance during the cheque presentation ceremony or press conference and their names would be highlighted in news reports given their public profiles. Typically for such public figures, the value of cash or items donated would range between tens of thousands to tens of millions of Ringgit. Jeffrey Cheah, for instance, through his company Sunway Group, had committed some RM34 million to help Malaysia combat COVID-19 and support at least 40,000 beneficiaries ("Sunway Group commits RM34 million," 2020).

Philanthropy by Lesser-Known Chinese Individuals and Businesses

Meanwhile, many lesser-known individuals of Chinese ethnicity and businesses by local Chinese also contributed to the various funds and foundations to fight the highly contagious respiratory disease and assist those affected by it. For example, several readers of *Sin Chew Daily*, some of whom preferred to remain anonymous, donated up to RM 30,000 per person through the newspaper's Yayasan Sin Chew. In another instance, one "Yvonne Lam" would donate RM 100,000 to The Edge Covid-19 Equipment Fund in her individual capacity. Interestingly, sums like these as donated by lesser-known or unknown Chinese Malaysian individuals were comparable to what some of the small and medium-sized businesses had contributed. To put things into perspective, in Malaysia the average price of a house stands at over RM 400,000 (Delmendo, 2020).

Across the ten-month period, philanthropic activities appear to be the most rigorous in March 2020, as reported in the news. This was in conjunction with the implementation of the MCO, a first in the history of Malaysia amidst the rising number of COVID-19 cases that naturally had people feeling alarmed and concerned. At the same time, the government, as well as various for-profit and non-profit organisations also pioneered and promoted some COVID-19 funds, such as the leading national fund initiated by the ruling Perikatan Nasional government and the ones by *The Edge* and *Sin Chew Daily*. These institutions also managed to get some prominent businesses, businessmen, and other bodies to spearhead and contribute to the funds. This had likely encouraged more, subsequent philanthropic activities. As a result, March 2020 had also witnessed the highest cash donations compared to other months.

Concerted Efforts to COVID-19 Philanthropy amidst "Donor Fatigue"

As contributions to the national and *The Edge's* funds appear to have slowed down or attracted less news coverage from April 2020 onwards, various donation activities led by Yayasan Sin Chew and in collaboration with a string of business and non-business partners seem to be more consistent and coordinated through the period between March to December 2020. Such donations to deprived members of the society, front-liners, and hospitals, were mostly in the form of cash. In April 2020, various medical resources donated, such as PPE and intensive-care-unit ventilators, had surpassed cash donations. Besides, non-medical items were also donated, which included rice, dry noodles, canned foods, cooking oil, bottled drinks, and the likes.

By May 2020, major donations by Yayasan Sin Chew and partners had begun moving away from hospitals to focus on social welfare groups such as Society of Chinese Disabled Persons Malaysia and En Yuan Old Folks Home, as well as families affected by COVID-19. This could be due to that by around then, the pandemic curve in the country might have been flattened as a result of the MCO (Emir Zainul, 2020), coupled with the fact that the government had allocated some budgets to cater for medical needs, such as the purchase of equipment and services to overcome COVID-19 (Ain Umaira et al., 2020). Also, Malaysians had begun reeling from the effect of the pandemic, and this was especially true for those from the low-income group of B40 – an income classification by the government to refer to households that earn RM 4,849 and below per month.

In November 2020, it was reported that there could be a possible "donor fatigue" as donations from individuals had become slow (Chung, 2020). For Mercy Malaysia, although it might have the same number of regular donors, the amount of donation received had decrease amidst the country's bleak economic situation

stemming from the pandemic and MCO. In December 2020, it was reported that 100,000 Malaysians had lost their jobs since the start of the MCO (Tan et al., 2020). To address the issue of “donor fatigue,” Malaysians who could not make monetary donations were advised to help NGOs that were coordinating volunteering efforts with the authorities. That way, the efforts would be more effective compared to volunteering on a “piecemeal basis” because these NGOs would know which high-need areas and communities to target. Besides, there were also calls for corporations to donate as this could buffer the effect of “donor fatigue” as humanitarian assistance needed to continue so as to alleviate suffering.

Conclusion

Based on the findings above, it is proven that philanthropy by Chinese Malaysians is not new and has been going on since the mass migration of the Chinese to various parts of Southeast Asia in the second half of the 19th century. In the first few decades of the 20th century, many Chinese philanthropists in the Malay Peninsula responded and contributed more to issues faced by China, as well as supported fellow Chinese in the host community. As a matter of fact, most of the Chinese left their motherland to escape poverty in order to look for better job and business opportunities in the Malay Peninsula. Whether they were merchants or labourers, once they had set foot in the host country, due to the lack of familiarity with the place it was natural for them to look for people or groups that originated from the same hometown, or at least communicated in the same dialect, for support. After all, the Chinese have traditionally emphasised on the concept of “blood ties.” Eventually, when this group had grown familiar with the environment and made some achievements, they would contribute what they could to their motherland and support the Chinese in the host country – whether it was those who shared the same dialect, those from the same hometown, or the Chinese in general. For the early migrants, their generous donations to the motherland could have partly stemmed from the fact that many of them did not realise they were eventually going to call Malaya their home.

As the Chinese began to hold more social resources, most of them also found themselves settling down. They gradually shifted their philanthropic focus to Malaya, especially after the latter had obtained independence. Then, the government had envisaged for the immigrant Chinese and Indians to assimilate themselves into the nation’s development. As much as the Chinese’s attachment to their motherland was still strong, for they had to, for instance, rely heavily on the Chinese press for news from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Lent, 1974), various national guidelines and policies had led the ethnic Chinese to be more attune to the government’s effort in nation-building. Philanthropic works carried out by Chinese Malaysians/Malaysians in the post-independence setting eventually were focused on resolving Chinese issues in the country, as well as problems facing other ethnic communities living side by side.

In response to the global health crisis of COVID-19, Chinese philanthropy in the country has remained overwhelming. While donations pledged by some local Chinese business leaders were in the millions, it is interesting to see how many lesser-known and even anonymous individuals would contribute up to hundreds of thousands of Ringgit to assist in the fight against the pandemic. Also, it is worth mentioning that many such activities as initiated by some charitable foundations or organisations have been handled well and in a strategic, coordinated, and targeted manner. Instead of letting donors contribute whatever they wished, these

organisations would approach donations based on what was needed and where the donations were needed most. The collaborative strategy employed by some of the charitable organisations also served to create better synergy and provide a more unified approach to budgeting and spending. Although various philanthropic activities and donations carried out during the COVID-19 period cannot be directly comparable to those done in the past in terms of value, Chinese Malaysians' passion for and commitment to philanthropy remain evident and speak for themselves. After all, the Chinese believe in the philosophy as expressed in the traditional saying, "Return to society by one who has gained from it." In the case of the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia, the needy across the country, regardless of ethnicity and religion, have benefitted greatly from the philanthropic contributions by a string of Chinese Malaysian individuals, businesses, and organisations. From assisting members of the local Chinese community initially to extending such support to Malaysians of different ethnicities, this also indicates a shift in the nature of Chinese philanthropy in Malaysia from centuries ago until now. Lastly, it must be noted that the data on Chinese philanthropic activities is limited to what the researchers could find and what was reported in the media; there were likely to be many more such activities that were unreported.

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