

# Historical Reflection on Chinese philanthropy

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## Opening Questions

I have been bothered by some questions for a long time on Chinese philanthropy - Traditionally, philanthropic virtues such as benevolence, charity, compassion, or generosity have always mattered in Chinese culture as evidenced by the teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, but why Chinese philanthropy is lagging behind? Why only 14% individuals donate their money, and 4% volunteer their time? Why philanthropy hasn't picked up the same speed as the economic growth? Why actions, donations or volunteering, haven't matched the enthusiasm in the public media yet?

Spending the past 3 years in the USA studying American nonprofit and philanthropy have allowed me to conduct some comparative observations between Chinese philanthropy and American philanthropy. These comparisons have yielded a long list of differences between the two countries, from the incomplete legal structure, the disincentive tax policy, to the cumbersome registration and administration process, and lack of philanthropic consciousness among the public, etc.

These differences may explain why Chinese philanthropy is lagging behind. However, I find it extremely hard to settle with those observations --- these factors are closely related to government policies, which are not only beyond our immediate influence as philanthropic professionals in an authoritative society, but also take time to change.

While horizontal cross-border comparison doesn't yield satisfactory answers to my questions, shifting my research into tracking the charity culture in China has led me to some interesting findings. I realized that for most time in Chinese history, charity was the major form of philanthropy. It worked very well in the totalitarian agriculture economy before the political shift in social system in 1949. Then philanthropy was discontinued for a few decades after 1949, and today's philanthropy carries a lot from traditional charity. It turns out that the very legacy of traditional Chinese philanthropy has created much of the challenge for today's philanthropic development in China.

## Review of Chinese traditional philanthropy

The historical period under review is pre-1949, which can be roughly divided to two periods: imperial period from ancient China to 1911, and republican period between 1911 and 1949. This overview does not intend to give a detailed account on the history and evolution of Chinese philanthropy. Instead, it's aimed at drawing out the most distinct characteristics in Chinese philanthropy whose impact has last till today.

Chinese philanthropy can be categorized in three major fields: clan philanthropy, religious philanthropy and social philanthropy. Some scholars add a fourth category of state philanthropy, referring to charity programs carried out by the government on disaster relief, services specifically directed to the less privileged population, etc. I would rather leave this category behind, because Chinese imperial rulers, largely influenced by the teaching from Confucius and Mencius, another revered Chinese philosopher, on "benevolent government", often took on supplying public goods as part of the state function and a governing mechanism for social stability. This is very different from the philanthropic spirit we are talking about.

Clan philanthropy was deeply rooted in the agricultural economy, which didn't require much mobility. Family in China often referred to extended families until a few decades ago. Generations of extended family lived in the same villages and developed a strong clan culture. It was the responsibility of the "family" to take care of the poor in the clan.

Most notable religious philanthropy in China was Buddhism, which gained popularity around AD100. People donated money and goods to temples hoping to accumulate good karma, a requisite for reincarnation. Temples then redistributed money and goods to those in need. In late Ming dynasty, around 1500, Christianity entered China and engaged in various charity work such as building hospitals, orphanages, etc.

Social philanthropy refers to the non-clan philanthropic activities initiated voluntarily in the society, mostly by affluent merchants, influential gentry, or idealistic scholars. This form of philanthropy took shape in Ming dynasty (1368-1644, the second last dynasty), a period marked by commercial prosperity, export trade, and interactions between the east and the west. Social philanthropy developed well in Qing dynasty (1644-1911), social organizations flourished, such as soup kitchens, orphanages, trade associations, etc. After 1840, some educated people started promoting taking proactive approaches to poverty alleviation, such as teaching the poor income-earning skills. This trend didn't have a chance to fully develop because the following 100 years in China ( 1840-1949) was a troubled period with continuous wars.

The three categories of Chinese philanthropy share three distinct features in common:

### 1. Family/community-oriented

Family and lineages were no doubt the center of clan philanthropy. Members in the clan had a strong sense of belongings. The importance of family is also reflected in Buddhism teaching, such as the famous saying “A hundred years' efforts lead to crossing the river in the same ferryboat; a thousand years' efforts lead to sleeping on the same pillow (becoming a family)”. Buddhism also taught that doing good would benefit the offspring. Besides family orientation, strong community connections were observed among all three categories of philanthropy, largely because these philanthropic activities were mostly done locally to benefit people in the local community. Charity organizations often existed a long time in traditional Chinese philanthropy, many of which could even survive dynastic changes. The strong community bond developed through local charity contributed greatly to such longevity.

### 2. Charity-focused

Almost all philanthropic activities are charitable giving, very much focused on disaster relief and providing money and direct service to the underprivileged people. Again, this is observed across all categories of philanthropy. As mentioned, although some social philanthropy in late Qing dynasty and republican period started moving toward economic development and promoting education, these initiatives had never gone mainstream.

### 3. Top-down approach

Hierarchy takes presence in almost all Chinese social structures throughout history, from state to family. Obedience was considered a virtue in traditional Chinese culture. There is no exception in philanthropic activities. In clan philanthropy, it was the seniors of the family who decided who got what help; in religious philanthropy, temples, monks and masters stayed above donors, no matter how much they donated; in social philanthropy, again, leaders made decisions and managed the process.

Although philanthropy was never a mainstream sector in Chinese history, it indeed played very important roles in the society in two ways: first, it helped the disadvantaged people and provided supplementary services to the government; second, it helped build strong community bond, and digested a lot of social conflict within the community, thus contributed greatly to the overall social stability. Because of these positive roles, philanthropy was always praised and encouraged by the government and the society, which in turn helped philanthropy grow in history.

Traditional Chinese philanthropy also had limitations: charity-centered giving put more focus on the process than the impact, and more on the immediate and temporary relief than on long-term needs; top-down operations offered little room for individuals to actively participate in the charitable process. However, these limitations didn't raise many issues in historical China because individuals were never encouraged to actively participate in political life anyway.

## Challenges on traditional Chinese philanthropy

Chinese philanthropy could have continued its natural path until several forces came to intervene after 1949.

The first force is that the party-state has shifted attitudes and changed policies on philanthropy. After Chinese Communist Party took over the country in 1949, the government assumed the role to provide all public goods to its people, and saw no need for private charity in a communist state. The term philanthropy was even labeled as bourgeois hypocrisy. In the following 30 years after 1949, private philanthropy was put to a halt; social organizations were either terminated or reorganized to serve as a government arm. Philanthropy became distant from people's daily life. However, in the last decade or so, especially in recent years, it's increasingly obvious that government is no longer able to meet all the needs for public goods and services in the society, thus the government is seeking philanthropic support from private capital. The change in government attitudes and policies created a huge gap in continuous philanthropic development.

The second force is that fast-paced industrialization and urbanization in the past 30 years have shaken up the social structure in which traditional Chinese philanthropy thrived on. People are no longer bounded by geographic boundaries; they move to cities for better education, more job opportunities and higher living standard. In 1998, government ended free-housing policy, which pushed the trend further and faster. People start buying houses in cities where they work, and resettle there. Manufacturing boom also attracted a lot of migrant workers to the cities, many leaving their family behind in the villages. Family bond and community connection are lost in this urbanization process, which serious erodes the foundation for traditional Chinese philanthropy.

The third force is that individuals have increasing awareness of their own identity and their role in the society. For thousands of years, individualism in China was suppressed, and people are identified by a set of collectivistic labels with emphasis on family, clan, community, and village. Higher education level, improved economic independence, free (relatively ) access to outside information, increasing international travel and interactions --- all these changes have empowered individuals to start to rediscover their own identity and their own values, especially the younger generations. This awakening awareness presented tension with the top-down approaches in traditional Chinese philanthropy. Meanwhile, they start asking for results, not just looking at the process. The traditional top-down charity-focused philanthropy hasn't been ready to respond to these new demands. So, although participation still surges in large-scale nation disaster relief, this disconnection has resulted in the failure for philanthropic organizations to garner sustainable support from the public.

In summary, the political power shift in 1949 interrupted the organic development of Chinese traditional philanthropy, and the discontinuity of philanthropy after 1949 removed the opportunity for Chinese traditional philanthropy to adapt itself to the new political system. Now the government is calling for philanthropic support, and it's natural for people to turn to the practice of traditional philanthropy. But the dramatic social, economic and cultural changes brought great challenges to these traditional practices. What worked before is no longer in place (family and community bond) or fit (charity-focus and top-down approach).

Then comes the basic question - do these challenges mean traditional Chinese philanthropy should be abandoned?

The answer is no. The challenges faced by Chinese traditional philanthropy don't question the value of family and community connection, nor underplay the role of charity philanthropy. The importance of family is deeply valued among all Chinese, young or old; the demand and desire for charity giving are always there, no matter how developed the economy is. The questions prompted by the analysis of the challenges are not about **whether**, but about **how**. How can we adapt the traditional Chinese philanthropy to the changed social environment? Although this is not an easy question to answer, I feel much more relieved. This reflective perspective has reassured me of the value in our tradition, and what we need to do is to reconnect to our traditional values, and complement it with visions and experience around the globe, then we can bring Chinese philanthropy to a new level.