In Singapore philanthropy is a much-valued part of society. Sunuja Naidu talks to some people behind our charitable institutions and finds out what accounts for their benevolence.

The story goes that one of Singapore’s pioneer philanthropists was invited to the Rockefellers’ home in the United States for a stay. At the end of it, his host asked him what he would like to receive. He said, “I don’t need to learn to make more money. What I would like is to learn to give.”

An appropriate enough statement given the Rockefellers’ renown for philanthropy. Theirs is but one of the many foundations that exist in the country. While our tiny island may not be able to compare with the US when it comes to numbers, the spirit of giving burns bright. Several of our country’s philanthropists have foundations to their name. Some examples are Lee Kong Chian, the Shaw Brothers, Tan Kah Kee, Khoo Teck Puat, Kwek Hong Png and Lien Ying Chow.

Foundations are usually set up with a permanent fund that is dedicated to charitable, educational, religious, research or other purposes. The earliest foundations here were family foundations, set up by migrants who came to the country with little and made a fortune. Many of them wanted to give back, to help others, both back in their hometown and in the local community and hence, set up foundations. In an interview with the National Heritage Board’s Oral History Department, under its project Pioneers of Singapore, movie mogul Tan Sri Runme Shaw was quoted as saying, “We make money from the public, we want to give the money back to the public. What is the best way to give money back to the public? So we thought of a foundation: the Shaw Foundation.”

Some philanthropists choose to devote themselves to a particular cause, an example of which is the Tsao Foundation. Founded by Tsao Ng Yu Shun, the widow of shipping magnate Tsao Ying Yung, it contributes solely to the welfare of the elderly. The Lee Foundation, set up in 1953 by the late Dato Lee Kong Chian had education as its original focus, and still donates significant amounts to the arena. During its most recent, $50 million gift to the Singapore Management University, his son, Lee Seng Gee, who is chairman of the foundation said, “My late father’s primary concern was to contribute towards education not just in Singapore but also in Malaysia, China and beyond. He was a firm believer in education.” Over time, however, the foundation has spread its wings far and wide, making out grants to medicine, the arts and other charities.

Given their penchant for privacy, much of the real work goes on beyond the glare of publicity. As one of the longest-standing foundations, social workers have been known to tap into its “float” fund to supplement government welfare cheques when they encounter families in difficulty.

Generally, foundations can be set up as a society (through the Registry of Societies), a company limited by guarantee not having a share capital (through the Registry of Companies and Businesses) or a trust. It can apply for charity registration if it is set up exclusively for charitable purposes or other purposes beneficial to the community. Charity registration is subject to the Charities Act.

Most foundations here, if not all, have IPC (Institute of Public Character) status, which authorises them to receive tax-deductible donations. Tax-exemption is clearly one of the reasons for their existence but it is, seldom, their sole or primary raison d’être. Lee Seng Gee was reported to have said, “People usually set up family foundations for tax reasons. It’s not necessarily a bad reason, but it is not the best reason. Family foundations result from excess funds than you actually require. Start from there and you have a freer hand in deciding what to do with the money. It’s not about tax exemption.”

For many, it is about giving back to society. Della Lee, wife of Lee Seng Gee, chose to channel her $1.62 million anniversary gift into
setting up the DS Lee Foundation. For her, it was the opportunity to use the money to cater to a perceived need: boosting the status and quality of nursing in the country. Says Della Lee, a medical doctor who used to head a department in a private hospital in Indonesia, “The purpose of the DS Lee Foundation is to upgrade the training and quality of nurses. Nurses in Singapore are quite good and hard-working but in many cases their quality of work and educational standards can be further improved. Nurses are often the ‘low-end’ nurses; we hope to upgrade them to become ‘high-end’ nurses, so that their working standards can be closer to that of doctors.”

For Tsao, putting her husband’s inheritance into a fund represented the opportunity to leave a legacy to society and her family. It also saved her the hassle of divvying up the money among her children, all of whom are doing well in their own right. “My grandmother,” says foundation director Maryann Tsao, “had been a good wife, mother and granddaughter. At the age of 86, she wanted to be a citizen in her own right and to contribute to society, not just her own family.”

While the majority of family-owned foundations were set up by the founding fathers themselves, some were initiated by well-wishers or others who wanted to continue the work and name of the person. The Tan Kah Kee Foundation is one example. When the well-known philanthropist and one of the most outstanding Chinese entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia passed away in Beijing on August 12, 1961, a memorial service was held in Singapore a month later. More than 5,000 representatives from over 280 associations and clans came to pay their respects to Tan. During the event, the Tan Kah Kee Scholarship Fund was established, in memory of Tan’s educational spirit, with the donation of $100,000 from the participants. In 1982, the foundation was granted IPC status by the government and was allowed to raise an endowment fund of $8 million.

Most family foundations have a committee of trustees to manage them, and they usually include a member of the family. The Tsao Foundation is a good example. Being an operational, rather than a grant-making foundation, there is even greater involvement by the family in running it. Tsao, for example, is driven in her work by the love she has for her family as well as her passion for the cause borne out of her respect for the founder. “I appreciate the thoughtfulness of my grandmother. She really thought about how she was doing this and why she wanted it done.” Discussing the objectives of the foundation also helped to draw grandmother and granddaughter even closer. “I found out a lot about her,” reveals Tsao. “As a citizen, she wanted to provide additional glue for the family to stay together. It’s a philanthropy that can serve multiple purposes. It’s no longer just the person but the values and spirit behind it.”

Similarly, the management decisions for the Lee Foundation are made by Lee Seng Gee with some help from his wife as well as a board of directors that include his two brothers, Seng Tee and Seng Wee. He was reported to have said in a recent interview, “The Foundation is one part of our organisation, we can’t just give it to anybody. Each person has his own ideas and their own prejudices. If

“To Trust or Not”

Many foundations operate as trusts in Singapore, mainly for administrative reasons. Some of the more well-known trusts include the Yong Loo Lin Trust, which recently contributed $25 million to the Singapore Conservatory of Music. It has now been renamed the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, in honour of Yong Loo Lin’s daughter, a music teacher who passed away in 2000. Then there is the Ong Siew May professorship, which was established by the late President Ong Teng Cheong in memory of his wife, a well-known architect. The professorship has paved the way for world-class architects to lecture at the National University of Singapore’s Department of Architecture, giving it a boost in its mission to attain design excellence. Says Ong Tze Boon, who heads the family’s architecture firm, Ong and Ong. “It is important to support Singaporeans so they can take their skills further. Architects are the builders of our society; architecture encompasses culture, history. An architect is truly a Renaissance man.”
Give & Let Live

Landmark Gift of S$50 Million from Lee Foundation

Lee Foundation

Pay: Singapore Management University

Singapore Dollars: Fifty Million Only

$50,000,000.00

A/C PAYEE ONLY

BANK/BRANCH NO.

ACCOUNT NO.

Top: President SR Nathan receives S$50 million from Della Lee and Lee Seng Gee on behalf of SMU.

Below left: Tseu Ng Yo Shin founded the Tseu Foundation.

Below right: Maryann Tseu's work honours her grandmother's vision.
Top left: Khoo Oon Teik, NKF founder. Top right: The sleek NKF Building. Below: An artist's sketch of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music.
Public Foundations

Apart from family foundations, there are public foundations such as the National Kidney Foundation (NKF), the SingHealth Foundation and the National University Hospital Endowment Fund. The NKF was founded by nephrologist Khoo Oon Teik in 1969 to improve the lot of patients with kidney failure. The foundation has grown by leaps and bounds and is now housed in a sleek building in Kim Keat Road. SingHealth Foundation came about with the aim of channelling the group’s surpluses into making a difference in the lives of patients. Its main thrust, says SingHealth’s CEO, Tan Ser Kiat, is training and education, and research and development. The fund, which was created a year and a half ago, has steered its funds into the creation of a public cord blood bank and has sent its staff to overseas institutions to pick up their training as well as gain insights into how top medical centres are run. The National University Hospital, too, has its own endowment fund that helps needy patients with their medical treatment costs and supports medical research and education.

The future of Singapore’s foundations will depend on the people at the helm

Several of the older ones have younger family members on their boards of trustees as, for example, the Shaw Foundation. This has helped lead to a mindset change in the way grants are made with a greater focus on making the money work harder and making sure the money is well spent.

The future of Singapore’s foundations will depend on the people at the helm. In order for them to keep going, Tsao feels that there is a need for foundations to be professionally run, as it is the case with long-sustaining ones in the UK and the US. At the same time, she feels that just like them, the family must remain actively involved in the setting of policy as well as making sure the vision is preserved and the funds well managed.

From top: Ong Tee Boon stands in front of his mother’s portrait; The restored CHIJMES building is one of Ong Siew May’s achievements