Social Innovation in Singapore:
Two Case Studies of Non-governmental Organisations

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have long been a force for social innovation in Singapore society. Along with the government and the private sector, they have been an important part of the "Singapore model" that has built a prosperous, just and caring society with a high quality of life that is the envy of the world. This paper concentrates on two types of NGOs: Chinese clan associations and grassroots organisations (GROs), both of which are extremely important from the specific standpoint of social innovation in Singapore. The influence of Chinese clan associations was at its peak in the colonial period when Singapore was an underdeveloped society with an immigrant Chinese majority. Grassroots organisations became important during the post-independence period of nation-building, in tandem with rapid economic development.

Key Words: *Social Innovation, NGOs, Chinese Clan Association, Grassroots Organisation*

In this paper, I examine the phenomenon and role of social innovation in Singapore's historical and post-independence development by analysing two types of NGOs – Chinese clan associations and grassroots organisations. I chose to focus on these two types of NGOs for two reasons. First, the Chinese clan associations were the NGOs that affected the most people in Singapore during most of the colonial period, since the Chinese constituted the majority of the population then. Second, the GROs deserve special attention because they are the first community-based NGOs which represented the entire population of Singapore, and also because they have provided a unique platform for cooperation and feedback on social and economic development between the people and the PAP government. Using these two case studies, I will examine the role NGOs played in the social innovation of Singapore.

CASE STUDY 1: CHINESE CLAN ASSOCIATIONS
THE EMERGENCE OF CHINESE CLAN ASSOCIATIONS

The modern history of Singapore began in 1819 when Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles established a British port on the island. From 1824 to 1872, Singapore's trade greatly increased as it grew from a trading post to an important port city, attracting many people from China to migrate to Singapore. "In the 1840s, after China lost the Opium War,

there was an exodus of Chinese migrants to all parts of South-east Asia". [1] The 1911 Revolution failed to solve China's political, social and economic problems, and wars subsequently broke out between the different warlords. The unstable social situation forced many Chinese to leave their homeland to seek a better life elsewhere.

Most of the early Chinese migrants arrived in Singapore virtually penniless and faced such problems as finding employment, lodging and friends. Hence the birth of Chinese clan associations, which offered humanitarian assistance to the early immigrants. These associations helped new immigrants to settle down and seek employment. The other main preoccupations of the associations were sponsoring education and helping destitute members (Wickberg 1994).

In 2005, the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations published a book entitled *History of Clan Associations in Singapore*. [2] This book documented 200 Chinese clan associations, comprising 116 kinship clan associations and 84 locality clan associations. More than 90% of these clan associations were set up before 1960. Table 1 provides information on the founding of some Chinese clan associations.

Table 1: Dates of founding of Chinese clan associations in Singapore

	1800-1900	1901-1940	1941-1959	1960-1965	1966-
Kinship clan associations (116)	13 (11.2%)	38 (32.7%)	51 (44.0%)	5 (4.3%)	9 (7.8%)
Locality clan associations (84)	21 (25.0%)	34 (40.5%)	21 (25.0%)	7 (8.3%)	1 (1.2%)

Source: Compiled by the author based on the book *History of Clan Associations in Singapore* published by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, 2005.

The development of Chinese clan associations was at least partly a result of colonial policy. Within the colonial structure, the British administration left the various ethnic communities alone to handle their own social, culture, economic and political affairs, seldom intervening at all. The non-interventionist policy of the British colonial government thus led to the necessity for and development of

Chinese clan associations.

Before Singapore became self-governing in 1959, Chinese clan associations concentrated on humanitarian assistance, the religious needs and welfare of their members. The associations helped new immigrants find jobs and establish useful contacts, provided shelter and food, and ultimately, a sense of belonging to a community.

The clan associations also provided help to those in financial need. Early migrants had no social security, so clan associations provided welfare services to look after the sick, destitute and widows. The clan associations organised communal social and religious activities that offered much-needed interaction and breaks in the otherwise mundane and routine life of the coolies. One of the most important functions that clan associations served at that time was the offering of funeral services. Clan associations also acted as intermediaries in intra-community conflicts: "The familiarity of cultural practices reproduced in the alien colonial environment helped many to cope with the monotonous working life, loneliness and homesickness that came with their isolated migrant lifestyle" (Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce 2006:54).

As the Chinese immigrant population grew, education, cultural and other social needs also had to be met. From the late 19th century onwards, these clan associations not only helped newly arrived people in their community to settle down, but also financed schools and scholarships for the children of migrant families.

THE DECLINE OF CHINESE CLAN ASSOCIATIONS

At the Lee Clan General Association's 86th Anniversary Dinner on 28 October 1992, Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong said: "Since independence in 1965, many of the services the clan used to provide have been taken over by the Government and other civic organisations...the government took over the running of schools and public services. Thus the Chinese clan started to lose its appeal and purpose towards the community and thus they experienced a dwindling membership."[3] Furthermore, English was being taught as the first language in schools. This weakened the link between the clan associations and the younger generations. By the end of the 1970s, Singapore's housing and urban renewal programme resettled people in new public housing estates, and this further eroded the connectedness of the Chinese community. This was a major factor that led to the decline of Chinese clan associations, some of which became inactive or dormant.

THE REVIVAL OF CHINESE CLAN ASSOCIATIONS

Since the late 1970s, Chinese clan associations faced many obstacles in sustaining their existence. The associations tried to keep up with the changing practical and psychological needs of their members while adjusting to the growth of the nation-state and the changing socio-political environment. "Interestingly, the government suggested that clansmen organisations should take up a role in reinforcing Chinese values, 'Asian values' and Asian identity. Clansmen associations are viewed as the roots of Chinese culture and tradition, which in the government's view should be cultivated and preserved" (Selina Ching Chan 2003:79). Clan associations therefore were a good medium through which the nation could revive Chinese traditions and reinforce the Chinese identity.

In 1978, China started implementing economic reforms which resulted in rapid economic development, which in turn attracted the attention of the world. The revival of Chinese culture and traditions in Singapore became important at that juncture. The Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA) was formed in 1986, and marked a major turning point in the history of the clan associations.

In recent years, numerous clansmen fellowship meetings have taken place one after another in various countries around the world. The conventions have moved from their original emphases on clan ties and ancestral roots to cultural, economic, trade and academic exchanges. Cooperation between clan associations in Singapore and other overseas Chinese voluntary associations has also revitalised links with China, and networks have been reconstructed for investment and economic purposes (Liu Hong 1998).[4]

The changing social functions of Chinese clan associations reflect the corresponding changes in Singapore society, which was experiencing a new awareness of a Chinese cultural identity. This evolution more importantly demonstrates the resilience of cultural systems and their ability to respond to the changing needs of their members and the state.

CASE STUDY 2: GRASSROOTS ORGANISTIONS
### THE EMERGENCE OF GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS

Grassroots organisations (GROs) are uniquely Singaporean forms of NGOs that are guided and supported by the government and hence represent social innovation as a vehicle for government-people cooperation and feedback. When self-government was attained in 1959, the Singapore government had to overcome serious political, economic and communal problems to survive.

The People's Association (PA) was formed on 1 July 1960. In the words of its mission statement: "The People's Association brings people together to take ownership of and contribute to community well-being. We connect the people and the government for consultation and feedback. We leverage these relationships to strengthen racial harmony and social cohesion, to ensure a united and resilient Singapore."[5] To rally grassroots support and to promote better rapport between the government and its people, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew began a two-year tour of all the constituencies in Singapore in 1962. During this tour, PM Lee discovered the importance of support at the grassroots level and came across outstanding grassroots leaders, who were later chosen to head grassroots organisations. After the PAP won the election in 1963, PM Lee decided to institutionalise the grassroots organisations in Singapore. Grassroots organisations are community-based volunteer organisations with strong government support through the PA. They are thus a unique social innovation that connects people with the government through non-government initiatives, and facilitates social and economic development through cooperation and public feedback.

Before the PA was established in 1960, there were 28 community centres (CCs) "providing a place for local residents to participate in social and recreational programmes and more specifically to disseminate colonial government policies and information. The first two of these were opened in 1953 in Serangoon and Siglap constituencies (S. Vasoo, Winnie Tang, Ng Guat Tin 1983:1-2)." The PA took over these community centres. Unfortunately, the facilities of the centres then were few and far between (吴俊刚，李小林2000:
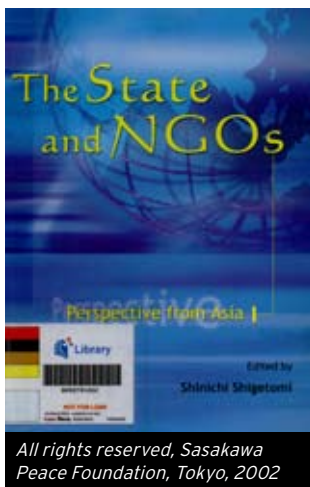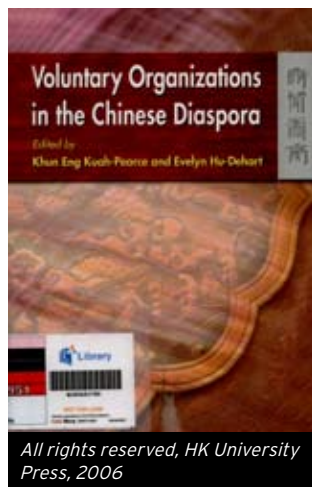
39-44). Therefore, the first programme implemented by the PA after its inauguration was to set up a large network of community centres throughout the island. Each constituency had several community centres. "Besides debunking communist bogeys and providing government information these community centre also organised social, cultural and recreational programmes for the young and old living in various neighborhoods (S. Vasoo, Winnie Tang, Ng Guat Tin 1983:2)." Until the early 1970s, the members of the community were not enthusiastic about the activities at the community centres, as facilities were not adequate. From the mid-1970s, community centres were built with modern décor and state-of-the-art facilities. The community centres were called Community Clubs since 1990.

The Community Centre Management Committee (CCMC) was formed in 1964. CCMC was the first pure community-based volunteers' organisation in the system of grassroots organisations in Singapore.[6] The members and leaders of the CCMC needed, however, to be approved by the PA. Each CC had a CCMC to plan and organise the centre's activities following the rules of the PA.

The Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs) was formed in 1965 when Singapore gained independence. Each constituency had one CCC as the apex grassroots organisation in that constituency. At that time, the infrastructure was not well developed. The CCC connected the government with its residents and offered suggestions for improving Singapore's infrastructure. CCC also played an important role in promoting racial harmony and helping the poor.[7] For more than 40 years now, they have played an integral part in Singapore's social cohesion. CCCs were extremely important in the 1960s and 1970s when Singapore underwent its resettlement movement. During the resettlement process, Singaporeans had to get used to living in a new environment in close proximity to other racial groups. Some were not satisfied with the government's compensation package. The relationship between the government and these uprooted people then was very tense. The CCCs mediated by explaining the government's policies to the people and provided feedback to the government and the tensions were eventually eased.

In 1978, the first Residents' Committee (RC) was formed as a result of Singapore's housing and renewal programme to promote neighbourliness and harmony in public housing estates. The importance of CCCs declined after this. Each RC had an RC Centre to conduct meetings, programmes and activities for residents. In the private housing estates, Neighbourhood Committees (NCs) encouraged active citizenry and fostered community bonds.[8] As with the CCMC, CCCs, RCs and NCs were community-based volunteer organisations.[9] Members and leaders of these NGOs had to be approved by the PA.

Within the GRO system, the CCCs were at the pinnacle of each constituency and were responsible for planning and leading grassroots' activities to promote good citizenship among its residents. The CCCs presided over community and welfare programmes, channelled feedback between the government and its people, disseminated information, and made recommendations on the development of public amenities and facilities.

The functions of the RCs and NCs were: to promote neighbourliness, harmony and cohesiveness among the residents, to liaise with and make recommendations to governmental authorities on the needs of residents; to disseminate information and channel feedback on government policies and actions from residents; and to promote good citizenry.[10] The RCs and NCs organised residents' parties, conducted house visits and other neighbourhood activities to reach out to residents. Run by residents for residents, the RCs/NCs also worked closely with other grassroots organisations and government agencies to improve the physical environment and safety of each local precinct.

The GROs were structured hierarchically. At the constituency level, there was a CCC comprising volunteers. Under each CCC, there were several CCs composed of volunteers and PA staff. In addition to the activities mentioned above, CC staff members attended the RCs/NCs meetings. CC staff periodically reported to the CCCs, which provided feedback and guidance. Despite the hierarchy, the channels of communication between the government and citizens were multi-level. Citizens could approach CCs, RCs, NCs or Ministries of Parliament (MPs) at the Meet-the-People Sessions (MPS) whenever they had problems they wanted resolved.[11]

Since independence, the Singapore government believed that community issues needed to be managed by the community members themselves, and transferred some of the powers of the government agencies to the grassroots organisations, which formed the bases of the GROs' system. Grassroots organisations became pillars of the PAP government and part of PAP's political strategy. Over the years, many national movements, such as the National Courtesy Campaign

and National Clean-up Campaign, were successfully implemented with the help of GROs. GROs drew on the traditional attitudes of community leaders and the assistance of community volunteers to form a network of organisations, and offered accessible venues and facilities for interaction and community services.

THE INSTITUTIONALISATION OF GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS

Most of the challenges facing the communities required locally-driven and creative solutions rather than a heavy-handed top-down approach of traditional government bureaucracies and programmes. GROs were community-based NGOs that were closely linked to the government. The GRO volunteers were residents who were energetic, passionate and proposed activities, initiatives, services and processes to address the social and economic challenges faced by their communities.

Through the nation-wide GROs network, the social services delivered by the Singapore government addressed Singaporeans' needs comprehensively.

The two types of NGOs discussed in this paper successfully carried out their goals and functions under contrasting conditions of a relatively non-interventionist state during the colonial period, and a highly interventionist state and weak civil society in the post-independence period respectively. The Chinese clan associations adapted to changing economic and social conditions by shifting their emphasis to cultural preservation. Grassroots organisations, despite a weak civil society and a strong state made themselves indispensable to the state as much as they were ultimately dependent on state regulation. Both types of NGOs have over the years demonstrated their robustness and adaptability to varying economic and socio-political conditions, and have played no small part in helping Singapore evolve into the thriving city-state it is today.

ENDNOTES

1. The Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, National Archives, Oral History Department, 1986. "History of the Chinese Clan Associations in Singapore". Singapore News & Publications Ltd., p. 20.

2. This book's coverage of clan associations is not comprehensive, being limited to the Federation's members. However, since the Federation included most of the active associations, the information provided in this book is relevant. According to Ms Lim Boon Tan, Executive Director of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, there are currently around 300 clan associations registered under the law. However, less than 100 of these are currently active. (I interviewed Ms Lim Boon Tan on 2 July 2008 at the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Association).

3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teochew_Poit_Ip_Huay_Kuan, accessed on June 20, 2008.

4. Liu Hong, 1998, Old Linkages, "New Networks: the Globalization of Overseas Chinese Voluntary Associations and its implications". *China Quarterly,* pp. 582-609.

5. Cited from the mission statement of the People's Association, http://www.pa.gov.sg/1146635937727/1153988278915.html

6. According to Mr Tan Kim Kee, the system of grassroots organisations in Singapore consisted mainly of CCCs, CCs/CCMCs and RCs/NCs. This system was initiated and supported by the PA. Therefore, although these NGOs could plan and organise activities by themselves, they had to follow the basic rules set by the PA. Residents of different races were welcome to participate in all activities, which had to be non-religious and non-political. Each grassroots organisation either organises activities by itself or cooperated with other organisations (On 17 July 2008, I interviewed Mr Tan Kim Kee, Group Director of Grassroots, at the PA).

7. Note: In the 1960s and 1970s, conflicts between different racial groups, especially between the Chinese and the Malays were a problem in Singapore. Leaders and members of the CCC were usually residents with influence in the society. Therefore, CCCs played an important role in promoting racial harmony and helping the poor. They took the initiative to volunteer and donate resources, and others followed suit.

8. Note: According to Mr Tan Kim Kee, the NCs were formed in 1998.

9. Note: PA staff worked at the CCs.

10. People's Association Neighbourhood Committee Rules and Regulations (amended, 15 September 2007). http://www.pa.gov.sg/1146635937727/1179997286746.html

11. Note: In Singapore, Members of Parliament hold MPS every month, to help citizens resolve any problems they had. For example, at Potong Pasir, MPS is held every Thursday at 7.30pm at the void deck of Block 108 void deck. Help provided by the MPs takes many forms, ranging from suggesting solutions to family discord, obtaining financial support in cases of emergency, to helping people obtain employment. The MPs explain government policies to the people as well, gather feedback, and channel the people's concerns to political leaders. MPs also visit people's homes regularly to see if they can offer any help and find out how they live. Grassroots organisations' network is supported by the PA, and is an important part of the PAP administrative system. MPS is organised by PAP and not by any grassroots organisation.

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