Community-based Philanthropic Organizations in Urban Asian Communities

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Community-based philanthropic organizations have begun to play an increasingly important role in serving the needs of communities throughout the world. One such community-based philanthropic organization is a community foundation, a grant-making public charity that gets support from diverse funding sources and in return provides grants to organizations who serve a defined geographic area. It is one of the fastest growing forms of organized philanthropy across the globe. In 1990, less than 440 community foundations were recorded worldwide. By 2008, this number has more than tripled to 1,441 (Sacks, 2008).

This tremendous growth in community-based philanthropic organizations has provided new opportunities for community-based social change. These activities can take a variety of forms to foster civic engagement, and to connect with grassroots organizations that serve the community. Research has analyzed the capacity for community-based philanthropic organizations to bring public administrators, donors, service providers, and citizen groups together to identify the most pressing issues facing communities and formulate policies to collectively address these challenges. Examples of community foundations leading complex community and economic development processes offer a glimpse into the potential for this type of engagement (Morgan, 2007). Much of the research on these activities, however, has been based on American organizations (Graddy and Wang, 2009; Lowe, 2006; Carman, 2001; Hammack, 1989).

It is not clear whether community foundations in different countries with different philanthropic traditions and institutional settings would engage in similar activities. The role of community-based philanthropic organizations in Asia has been largely ignored. The institutional form is relatively new in most Asian countries, with the oldest one—the Osaka Community Foundation, established in Japan in 1991. The Beautiful Foundation in South Korea was established in 2000. Strictly speaking, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong don't have community foundations as defined by existing research, but there are foundations that focus their activities on a particular geographic area or communities. For example, the Shanghai Charity Foundation, established in 1994, focuses on Shanghai community/municipality. Its fundamental conception is similar to a community trust or a community foundation (Shue, 1998). In this study, we seek to understand the role these organizations have begun to play in their communities and how that role differs from the American experience.

Our exploration will be based on a comparative case study of four urban community foundations--in Osaka, Japan (Osaka Community Foundation), in Hong Kong (Community Investment and Inclusion Fund), in Shanghai, China (Shanghai Charity Foundation), and in Seoul, Korea (The Beautiful Foundation).

The study focuses on the major activities of these foundations and examines the impacts of those activities on their communities. We will also put the comparison into a broad institutional context, including the state-nonprofit sector relationship, community autonomy, and the civic tradition. The study will explore the role that local philanthropic organizations play in strengthening the connections of various sectors and actors in a community. In addition, we will explore whether the impact of a community foundation on social capital is constrained by institutional context and the civic tradition. The results should thus contribute to our understanding of the global role of community based philanthropic organizations, and offer insights for their leadership and development.