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Class Divide in Chinese-Americans' Charity

By NINA BERNSTEIN

As a schoolteacher in New York's Chinatown in the 1960s, when the government's war on poverty seemed focused on blacks and Latinos, Virginia Kee noticed that many of her Asian pupils were too poor to pay $2 for a class trip. To connect community needs with public money, Ms. Kee helped found what is now the Chinese-American Planning Council, one of the largest social service agencies for Asians in the country.

These days, in an era of shrunken public dollars and booming philanthropy, as universities and museums showcase multimillion-dollar gifts by Chinese-Americans, Ms. Kee worries about a different kind of disconnect: a divide between the explosive growth of Chinese-American wealth and the unmet needs of a new generation of Chinese immigrants who have streamed to the city since the 1990s.

In the society pages, out of reach, Ms. Kee said, she sees figures of Chinese-American success at benefits that raise half a million dollars for the Frick Collection or $3 million for breast cancer research.

"We're out of their orbit," Ms. Kee observed wistfully. "We get donations from poor people that we've helped. We don't get donations from the rich, who should be helping the poor."

No comprehensive numbers exist to track charity by ethnic groups, let alone donors of Chinese heritage. Many people of all ethnicities keep their donations private.

But concerns about an uptown-downtown split are widely echoed by Asian-American groups serving the working poor in the sprawling Chinatowns of Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan; by scholars of philanthropy; and by Asian donors who have bucked the tide.

Those concerns have grown along with the influx of immigrants from China, up 53 percent in New York in the 1990s alone; today, among foreign-born New Yorkers, the Chinese outnumber every nationality but Dominicans.

Of course, many other immigrant groups have shown similar patterns of giving. The first generation typically sends money back to needy relatives and hometowns, while later strivers mark their success with gifts to mainstream institutions patronized by America's patricians, or give to art and education to enhance wider appreciation of their cultural heritage. Even Jewish philanthropy, now often admired as a model of ethnic solidarity, was long divided by resentment between wealthy German Jews and penniless Jewish newcomers from Eastern Europe.

But the Chinese diaspora in America has been even more fragmented by language, lineage, class and political history. In 1949, when the founding of Israel served as a unifying event for many Jews, the rise of Communist China further polarized the Chinese in America, noted Henry Tang, 65, a founder of the Committee of 100, an organization of prominent Americans of Chinese ancestry.

For people in his generation, Mr. Tang said, loyalties and outlook differ radically depending on where and when they trace their Chinese roots. There is little commonality between, say, the children of the wealthy elite who left Shanghai before World War II and the descendants of Cantonese peasants who migrated to the United States in the 19th century and were ghettoized by anti-Chinese laws. The differences can be even sharper, he said, for those raised in Hong Kong, Taiwan or a rural province of mainland China.

"When you say, 'Donate money to help the Chinese,' " Mr. Tang explained, "they're conflicted that their monies will not be helping people of their own. Like, some people will say, 'I grew up in Taiwan, and you're asking me to help these people from Fujian' " — the coastal province that has generated the latest wave of immigrants, both legal and illegal.

"Others will say, 'I'm a Hong Kong person, and your mission here is to serve people from everywhere else.' Or you may get an A.B.C. — American-born Chinese — saying, 'Well, I really want to help the people in downtown San Francisco.' "

As immigration soared after the 1965 overhaul of immigration laws and Asians reached 5 percent of the American population, the picture was further complicated by a pan-Asian structure of giving fostered by the United Way. Umbrella organizations like the Asian American Federation lump together groups that have warred with each other in recent history — Koreans, Japanese, Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, as well as the Chinese, who officially reached 2.5 million in 2000, with 374,000 in New York City.

"When you represent all Asian ethnic groups, you don't represent any Asian ethnic groups," said Wayne Ho, director of the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families. "It's really hard to get individual donations."

A working paper on Asian-American philanthropy produced at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute in 2004 cited anecdotal evidence that "many Chinese-Americans do not give at all, and those that do, give to their university, or to their church, but not to ethnic causes." The author, Andrew Ho, who recently earned an M.B.A. along with a master's in public policy, added in an interview that especially among the well-off in their 30s and 40s, "those ties that bind us all as Chinese are not there," making suburban fund-raising difficult for organizations trying to help new immigrants.

Such groups typically hope for a continuing relationship with the prominent Asian-Americans honored at their annual galas, but report mixed results. For example, two Asian groups that honored Vera Wang, the American-born fashion designer, in the 1990s said they had been unable to get her to attend benefits since. (Ms. Wang declined through a spokeswoman to be interviewed for this article.)

But the rising affluence of a younger generation of Asian professionals shaped by American ideals and New York diversity is prompting fresh efforts to bridge the gaps.

"I make easily 10 times what my parents would make in a lifetime," said Jimmy Pang, 34, an investment banker who grew up in what he called "the hodgepodge" of Elmhurst, Queens, and saw his parents, a waiter and a garment worker, scrimp to pay his Catholic school tuition. "I could just be one of the lucky ones, so I think it's good to give back."

Mr. Pang was a founding member of AsiaNextGen, a small "giving circle" of young Asian-American

professionals who want to be catalysts for change. Started in 2004 by five friends who each donated $4,000, the group gave $20,000 to the Queens Child Guidance Center to hire a part-time social worker. This year, they plan to choose a program for the elderly.

The sums are modest, said Mr. Pang, who helps manage a $20 billion asset fund in Hong Kong for his company. But leading members like Gary Lee, a Wall Street analyst raised in Whippany, N.J, and Michelle Tong, the director of donor relations for the Asian American Federation, believe they are pioneers of a more vocal, hands-on Asian-American philanthropy.

"The majority of the Asian ethnic groups, they don't want to draw attention to themselves," said Ms. Tong, who joked that she absorbed outspokenness with the lox and bagels she ate growing up in Bergen County, N.J. "Once they've achieved a certain level, some of them tend to distance themselves from where they come from. They want to show that they've made it, they want to blend in with the mainstream. They don't go back to Chinatown."

Exceptions tend to underscore the importance of individual connections. Many of those interviewed cited the way a clinic that had been established in Chinatown by volunteers in 1971 became the Charles B. Wang Community Health Center. It was renamed for Mr. Wang, the co-founder of Computer Associates, after he gave $1 million for its expansion in 1999.

But initially he rejected the clinic's application for money, recalled Marie Lam, one of the founding volunteers and the board chairwoman. Mr. Wang, the donor as well of a $52 million Asian and Asian-American cultural center on the Stony Brook campus of the State University of New York, changed his mind after a mutual friend intervened, she said.

Mr. Wang said he did not recall the initial request from the health center, "but was pleased to learn more about it and what they were doing, and how my donations could make a significant difference."

Ms. Lam herself, a Hong Kong doctor's daughter who earned a degree in social work at the University of California at Berkeley and married a New Jersey businessman, said she might never have connected to ailing immigrants in Lower Manhattan. But she happened to volunteer at a Chinatown health fair, and was moved to find sick old men stranded without families by the effect of old immigration laws and reluctant to apply for Medicaid.

"I've seen the hardships people go through," she said. "I've gotten some of my friends and acquaintances interested. But people want to see a bang for their buck."

Some observers, like Kenneth J. Guest, an anthropologist at Baruch College who has studied the latest immigrant stream from Fujian province, see a divide even within Chinatown between the newcomers, who have little education, and those who run the nonprofit organizations.

"There's some very strong prejudice within the Cantonese community," he said, drawing a parallel with assimilated German Jews who looked down on Jewish newcomers from Russia. "It's interesting to see what the 30-somethings will do."

Today, almost a third of Manhattan's Chinatown residents live in poverty, including 40 percent of children

and 35 percent of the elderly, census data show, and only about 7 percent of households receive public aid. At the other extreme, a 2004 study by the Spectrem Group of Chicago, financial consultants, found that Asians accounted for 5 percent of affluent households in the United States, up from 1 percent two years earlier; they had an average net worth of $2.9 million, typically earned rather than inherited.

"The Chinese-American community really has an opportunity because there's a critical mass that wasn't there before," said Jessica Chao, a vice president at Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. "A critical mass of wealth and opportunity, and a critical mass of awareness of the social issues that impact poverty."

For social service organizations like Ms. Kee's, the emerging link may be the people they helped as children. Danny Ong Yee and Norman Louis, boyhood friends who attended the council's child-care programs, are now, respectively, the founding trustee and the executive director of the Ong Family Foundation, which provides annual grants of $5,000 to $50,000 to nonprofit organizations, including the council.

"We were not the royal class; we were the peasant class," Mr. Louis said. "My mother did not know how to read or write; she was a seamstress. My father worked in a restaurant. Danny's father worked in a laundry."

Mr. Yee, formerly a partner of Goldman Sachs, now lives in Hong Kong, but cherishes his Chinatown roots, Mr. Louis added.

"We want to give all the new immigrants and American-born children the same opportunities," he said. "We want to open it up to them."

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