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The Thrill of Giving Back: The Chain Reaction Project

By Lauren S. Power

As I sat down to interview Tingjun Zhang, Co-Founder and Director of The Chain Reaction Project (TCRP), and Christina Liew, TCRP's General Manager, I noted that they both wore their characteristic denim shorts and TCRP white polo sports shirts. Undeniably fit and refreshingly genuine, their down-to-earth style and inclusive manner made me feel welcome immediately. But these industrious change makers are anything but relaxed.

In 2009, Zhang and some friends formed a four-woman team to compete in the Tour de Timor, a 450-kilometer competitive bike race across nine of Timor-Leste's thirteen districts. As they prepared for their adventure, they decided to use the race to raise awareness and funds to benefit HIAM Health, an organization targeting malnutrition in women and children. Their campaign across various networks and media successfully raised SGD\$44,500 for their charity. The teamwork and passion they built during the process created the core of what would become The Chain Reaction Project.

By the end of the year, The Chain Reaction Project will have completed eighteen trips and raised nearly SGD\$550,000 since its launch as a registered non-profit in 2011. The number of TCRP participants, called catalysts, has reached more than 700. Through physically rigorous and informative training sessions, TCRP prepares its catalysts for the adventure ahead and builds strong bonds among teammates. While most catalysts are adults between twenty and forty years old, families with children as young as seven have participated in trips. A mixture of Singaporeans and expats from all over the world, catalysts are drawn together by a shared love of an active lifestyle, the thrill of a good challenge and a drive to help others. Approximately 30 percent of the participants for each trip are repeat catalysts, a testament to the loyalty and dedication TCRP inspires.

"We don't have a bullhorn, but we have relationships and networks—that's our advocacy," says Christina Liew. TCRP tries not to take on too many charity partners, choosing instead to maintain long-term commitments to a small group of causes. Usually, each catalyst is given a fundraising target of about SGD\$1,000 to benefit TCRP's selected charity for a particular trip. In turn, TCRP provides physical conditioning, cultural education and assistance in making the travel arrangements. TCRP also is committed to holding the charity partner accountable for the funds given.

"Adventure is just the platform," says Zhang of her process in building TCRP projects. The last time I saw Zhang in her cut-offs and polo, she was giving a presentation on innovation for the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), a prominent Singapore think tank for which she serves as a member of the advisory council. For Zhang, her involvement with the SIIA is to provide strategy and direction for TCRP trips. Advantageous insights from regional experts and access to

relevant networks help give Zhang and her catalysts a deeper look into the causes they seek to address.

"We try to weave the cause into the adventure," Zhang explains. TCRP's upcoming trip to Cambodia in early December, which aims to raise SGD\$40,000 to benefit the Sala Bai school's fight to break the cycle of human trafficking through education and employment mirrors the journey of a young girl and Sala

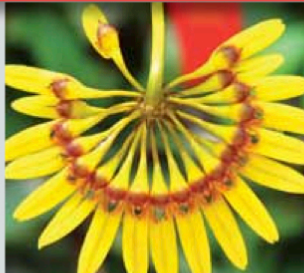
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TCRP bike race



Finish line



Sala Bai kitchen



Tonle Sap

Bai graduate. Catalysts will cycle through the fragile communities of Tonlé Sap Lake and hear from Sala Bai students and graduates. After returning to Siem Reap, participants will join in the annual Angkor Wat Half-Marathon. Through meeting the challenges of a TCPR adventure, Liew and Zhang believe that catalysts build the resilience of character needed to drive social change.

"We are motivated by the intangible," Liew reflects. "It's not about controlling an idea. It's about a global network made of catalysts." The Chain Reaction Project, as its name implies, is about connectivity. As seasoned catalysts travel, relocate or move back to their home countries, Zhang and Liew hope that they

will begin their own TCPR initiatives. TCPR plans to increase fundraising and volunteer opportunities in Singapore in addition to continuing its commitment to causes and adventures abroad.

To learn more about The Chain Reaction Project or register for the December 6-8 trip to Cambodia, please visit the TCPR homepage at www.thechainreactionproject.com or contact info@tcpr.com with any questions you may have.

Lauren S. Power is a freelance writer and research consultant. She came to Singapore to enjoy her passion for social, economic and foreign policy studies.



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